

BLOCKBUSTER CULTURE:
THE NUCLEAR FAMILY IN MELTDOWN

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The consideration of popular culture as a source for looking at artistic expressions as chronicles of social reform and current values is at the heart of this study. Yet, its "other" agenda is to undermine, as they collapse onto themselves, the positions of the academic discourse. Whether they come from the political left or the right, the "Truths" that gatekeepers possess--the canonization of art, the "interpretive communities," the traditions and fads--have been pushed aside by the force of blockbuster culture. The choice of subject matter for a discussion such as this is thus no longer in the hands of those "trained" in the profession of art appreciation; instead, the control now lies with the mass audience who "canonize" popular culture by the act of consumption.

The artistic canon within academic circles is either based on the traditions of "quality," or on concepts of social constructs such as identity, gender, or sexuality, just to name a few. Unlike popular culture, the foundation of knowledge in the academic process is internal and circular. It is, by its nature, exclusive and elitist. Popular culture, on the other hand, is inclusive and ubiquitous. It is where knowledge is shared, and it is where culture is grounded. Because of this, the texts through which the process of culture works clearly merit attention, though they are usually dismissed as "mere" entertainment by contemporary cultural critics, even in this enlightened age of the canon's elasticity.

This study, therefore, considers texts chosen outside the realm of individual artistic or political reflection. The immediacy of the shared knowledge that blockbuster entertainments address is what makes them relevant. The most commercially successful productions of the entertainment industry speak so loudly because they speak so clearly, and so effectively, about what is most on culture's mind--in this example, working through the cultural shift in the social construct of family. The conclusion is this: Hooked up directly to the audience, the electronic media circumvent the critic and powerfully address, not necessarily issues germane to the pundit, but always the salient points of the hoi polloi.

INTRODUCTION

BLOCKBUSTER CULTURE: THE NUCLEAR FAMILY IN MELTDOWN

Best-sellers in all the arts, exemplifying as they do the most general levels of attitude development, are worthy of very close study. No theory of criticism is satisfactory which is not able to explain their wide appeal and to give clear reasons why those who disdain them are not necessarily snobs.

Samuel Johnson, "Badness in Poetry"

American culture *is* popular culture. Popularity *is* power. And Elvis has definitely not left the building.

John Strausbaugh, *Alone with the President*

During World War II's Battle of Britain in the summer and fall of 1940, the German Air Force, the *Luftwaffe*, tried to wear down the British people and the Royal Air Force by dropping powerful bombs that were capable of destroying entire city blocks. These bombs, which came to be known as "blockbusters," caused extensive damage throughout London and the English countryside, but the RAF fought hard and managed to thwart the German challenge to air superiority. The heroic British resistance was an early high-point for the Allied forces and prompted Prime Minister Winston Churchill to proclaim his often-quoted line, "Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few."

While the term "blockbuster" is no longer used in reference to its now-antonym bomb--ironically, its closest *synonym* in modern usage might well be what the German's were hoping for, a hit--the context of the word is really not all that different. That is, "blockbusters" dropped on the mass-mediated, post-modern world may no longer literally raze city blocks, but their force sure can disrupt the foundations of everyday life. For instance, the age of the blockbuster has clearly changed the way that literature and film texts are produced and consumed in American--and indeed, in World--culture. It has also altered the traditions, though for the most part they have given way unwillingly, of those individuals who engage, at any level, in the multi-faceted discourse about such matters as culture, literature, film, or art. In other words, the post-Cold War blockbuster does not destroy the neighborhood; instead, it is like the guest who comes for a short visit and ends up staying much longer.

My reaction to blockbuster entertainments in the discussion that follows, then, is much like what I go through when I must deal with guests who will not go home. I want to understand them better, and I want to know why they leave such a lasting impression. I am not particularly concerned with my personal tastes, nor with my individual political agenda. What does concern me is my culture, for in my opinion all critics in the humanities should be

focused on the one "text" that matters the most, the world, and blockbuster entertainments offer yet another way, and arguably one of the best ways, to understand who we are and why we do the things we do. Whether we like it or not, the age of the blockbuster is upon us, and we need to take it seriously, for it is what is taken seriously by the culture in which we live and work.

CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS POPULAR CULTURE?: RE-VIEWING CULTURAL STUDIES IN THE AGE OF THE BLOCKBUSTER

What are the modes of existence of this discourse?
Where does it come from; how is it circulated; who
controls it?
What placements are determined for possible
subjects?
Who can fulfill these diverse functions of the
subject?

Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?,"
on the new questions that will be heard
in a world where "discourses unfold in a
pervasive anonymity."

Hip, Hip, Hooray, it's the American way--that's
Entertainment!

from the song, "That's Entertainment,"
by Howard Dietz and Arthur Schwartz

Shortly before the June 30, 1975, release of Steven Spielberg's film version of Peter Benchley's best-selling novel *Jaws*, my mother and I watched an installment of Phil Donahue's then somewhat-new-and-innovative daytime talk show, which on this day featured a panel discussion on the excessive violence in the soon-to-be released blockbuster hit. If my memory serves me correctly--that is, a memory greatly affected by the images available to a thirteen-year-old adolescent boy--Donahue and his guests were concerned

that the film's GP rating did not adequately warn parents of the film's "intense" nature. Not solely confined to the Donahue show (since Donahue did not have as many competitors then as now, his booking agents did not have to search among society's margins for the show's daily topics as much as they do today), the ratings controversy over *Jaws* lead to a warning label, which in turn eventually contributed to the formation of the PG label. (Ironically, yet another Spielberg film, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, the second installment of the *Raiders of the Lost Ark* trilogy, led to the ratings subcategory of PG-13.)

However significant the rating's flap may be to a history of entertainment in America, the Donahue-show incident does not stand out in my memory exclusively for whatever effect it had on Hollywood's Motion Picture Board; rather, I remember it for the conflict it caused between my mother and me. While the promise of violence of an "intense" nature sounded like a great way to spend two hours to me, my mother, concerned I assume for my psychological development, was none too happy with my overwhelming desire to see the film. I was fortunate, however; my father sided with me, though as always the agreement came with compromise. In order to get my mother to allow me to go to the film with him, my father offered that both he and I would read the novel first. If it proved too "intense" for me, or in his opinion, then I would not be able to see the

film. With the compromise struck, I knew that the war had been won: My father had told me that he too wanted to see the movie and felt that I could deal with whatever intensity it contained.

Now, in retrospect and through the eyes no longer of an eager-to-be-exposed thirteen year old but of an adult who has attempted to nurse his lifelong interest in popular entertainment into a career, I see that the importance of this incident lies not only beyond the ratings flap as well as beyond the family flap, but instead in the circular, what-goes-around-comes-around nature of American popular culture. That is, a television show enticed me to see a movie which I could only see if I read the novel first; moreover, after I saw the film, I bought the soundtrack, and later still, I became the proud owner of the film itself, or at least of its affordably priced video version. Indeed, as far as *Jaws* is concerned, I put the "consume" in "consumer."

I recount this what-might-be-called post-modern fairy tale because I think that it fairly represents the extent to which my generation and I (the front-runners of the post-Baby Boomers, of "Generation X") and our so-called intellectual development has been submerged in the fantastical texts of the age of the blockbuster in American popular entertainment. Our tastes were "refined" at roughly the same pace as the traditional outlets of entertainment-- literature, film, music, radio, and television (which I

include in this group because it has always been so much a part of my life and many of my peers that nothing we see truly *amazes*, or *surprises*, us)--were refined. As children, our books popped up and sometimes even smelled (scratch-and-sniff books). Our toys talked back, and our dolls wet their pants. Every family, as well as every where we went, had television, most often in color, and many of us learned our numbers and letters (and morals?) from a children's educational television show, *Sesame Street*, which premiered in 1969 (Ho, hum, what's the big deal, a couple guys walk on the moon; over here, we can watch this big yellow bird, and he can talk!). We grew as our entertainment grew. As adolescents, our viewing options improved, along with our reception, when we had cable television installed. We saw our parents glued to our babysitter and best friend as they watched and worried over whether the President of the United States would be impeached. As teenagers, our music coupled with our televisions, and our televisions doubled as movie theaters. We watched one show, while we recorded another. We'd have a party on Saturday night, and rather than listen to music and dance, we watched a certain live comedy sketch show on NBC. The force was with us, and we couldn't believe we "ate the whole thing." Computers came to our math classes, and in English, we followed along in our school-supplied books as we watched a video production of Shakespeare on the small screen. We went on "field trips"

to Broadway and took tours through NBC studios (moreover, if we had the chance to sneak away, we'd find ourselves in a Times Square porn shop, certainly one of the more "seedy" sides of our multi-faceted, engulfed-by-media education). We have been accused of having an attention span no longer than the time it takes to press the "Channel Forward" button (and, in the modern world, why *should* we?), and we have said good-bye to our formative years as albums have transformed into CDs. We came to age, in the words of author Michael Azzerad (*Come As You Are: The Story of Nirvana*), as a "marketing bloc." Our view of the world is indeed from the top of Mount Saturation.

The so-called MTV generation has been engulfed by seemingly limitless media, which in turn have created, contrary to the cries of an elite minority who worry about the demise of Western intellectuality, a sophisticated cultural participant quite capable of judgments, both of value and of taste. As the only post-1970 film to be among the original twenty five placed in the National Film Archives, George Lucas' *Star Wars* may be the film that saved Hollywood, or at least the film that made Tinseltown what it is today. However, the film's success at the box office as well as its historical significance would mean nothing if it were not for the support given to it by the saturation generation. We saw the movie eight or nine times; we read the novelization of the screenplay; and we bought the

soundtrack, the posters, the videotape, the action figures-- indeed, we purchased every item that was tied-in and marketed as a part of the *Star Wars* craze. Rather than possessing an attention span of a nano-second, the generation of which I am a part is perhaps more attuned to filtering out the worthless, to "multi-tasking," to celebrating--or at least purchasing--much of the best that mass culture has to offer (well, maybe not always the "best," but certainly, those commodities that offer what we want!).

American popular culture is certainly the foundation of the Blockbuster generation's enculturation, as it is fast becoming the foundation all over Western civilization (witness, for instance, PepsiCo.'s plans to open a Taco Bell in Mexico City!). As a bulk consumer of American entertainment, as a maker of the product, as well as a "made by" the product, I have a difficult time accepting much of what is said and/or theorized about American entertainment. While Dan Quayle's 1992-election year fretting about the social effects of Murphy Brown's decision to challenge the deeply imbedded traditional values of the American family was met by most political moderates and liberals with scorn, his view that popular entertainments essentially deconstruct the dominant ideology does not seem all that different from the views offered by predominantly left academic practitioners of popular culture criticism. Could Dan

Qualye and left academics actually agree? It might even make the cover of the *National Enquirer*, though there is probably too much of a basis in truth for that to be its fate.

In terms of the age of the blockbuster, both Dan Qualye's conservative stance, as well as most parts of the theories of the post-modern, "politically-correct," left academic critic, are too submerged in their political uses to adequately explain the whole nature of American popular entertainments. Thus, though I strongly endorse the deconstructive purpose of expanding the canon and relaying the challenges that these "fringe" or so-called "art" texts do make to traditional ideology, I think that often times the political agenda of the individual critic may fog his or her vision of the blockbuster entertainments. Left-leaning academics are usually unwilling to address and/or recognize the real texts of American popular culture because they do not provide an outlet for the expression of leftist ideology. Indeed, the entertainment industry at large (later in this chapter I will show that many individual creators of popular culture understand their "mission") and the politically-correct academic cultural criticism factory are in many ways no different. While both prefer to view themselves, not inaccurately, as dominated by left political thinking, they are at the same time motivated by the conservative reality of big business as they strive for

capitalist accomplishments. This system of rewards may explain, for instance, the role of women in Hollywood films, as well as the always-declining emphasis academics place on the students in their classrooms.

The state of mass cultural criticism in many ways reflects the state of classroom instruction within the American university system. Although the post-modern critical movement can lay claim on the much needed expansion of the literary canon and in turn the essential re-discovery of the many voices of America's cultural diversity, the complaint that college instructors are often guilty of programming students to think along a set ideological agenda should be taken seriously. Rather than encouraging--and sometimes even allowing--students to think for themselves, many left-leaning instructors agree, as do the majority of cultural studies critics, with Frederic Jameson. In his important *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Jameson insists that the "political interpretation of literary texts" is the "final" or "absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation," a political interpretation which generally enhances a leftist viewpoint. Much like the far too many cases of undergraduates who have had their right of free speech denied as they were suspended from particular universities for the use of so-called "hate" language, or in particular, the attempt by feminist professors at Connecticut College to

remove Camille Paglia's *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* from a reading list (these "opened-minded" liberals compared the best-selling book to *Mein Kampf*), Jameson's forceful closure of alternative critical methods seems more suggestive of fascism than his intended leftism. Consider, as well, the comparison that Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson make in their introduction to *Rethinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies*, and pay close attention to the subjectivity of their language:

Where the Right blamed the low level of mass culture on the tastes of the masses, the Left blamed it on elite efforts to domesticate a potentially unruly population. On the right, this brand of criticism did not develop in any systematic way, but on the Left, it became a sophisticated set of critical perspectives. (38)

Maybe Dan Qualye should shoot the interpreter, not the interpreted.

To be sure, the intellectual movement of the study of the people's culture is dominated, as James Naremore and Patrick Brantlinger state, by "a leftist mode of analysis" that "takes its specific character from the writing published by members of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies under the direction of Stuart Hall" (1). As an outgrowth and update of the Frankfurt School, the Birmingham group's writings are "strongly influenced by radical feminism and theories of social difference," are "interested in forms of popular reception,"

and occupy a "sort of middle ground between post-structuralism and humanism;" thus, the Centre's theory bases itself on a "dynamic model of the social subject" (1).

While Hall and his Birmingham group may be the theory *du jour* of academic critics, my assertion that the Centre's admittedly stimulating work does not fully consider all the significant issues of American popular culture is valid, especially when one notes their inability to completely bridge the gap between "high" and "low."

This problem of popular culture as an academic phenomenon results directly from the dichotomy between the social/political/personal agenda of the consumers of a culture's commodities and the agenda of what is essentially an intellectual elitist class of critics who profess to study both the people and their texts. When the academy appropriates a popular culture text that is and of itself not "high" enough to promote serious academic discourse--hence, secure publication, which in turn leads to tenure (the rewards, in the words of a post-modernist, of capitalist production)--the theoretical positions become bogged down in specialized topics and language which fails to adequately consider the fundamental issues of popular culture consumption, though it certainly promotes the individual critic's politics. For instance, is there not more to media-sensation Madonna's popularity than what Cindy Patton says of the singer's all-male dance troupe, who in

the "Like a Virgin" concert video of her Blond Ambition tour appear with strap-on falsies which they massage with "masturbatory intensity"? Patton writes, "the gendering of the breast is problematized through the evocation of breast envy and implicitly men's desire to be lesbians." Certainly, with her \$60-million, multi-media-development contract with Warner's, everyone's favorite prima dominatrix is an appropriate subject for culture-based discourse. Her sales and marketing success alone are surely a gauge of her position in American culture, though the specific fact that her soft-porn coffee-table book *Sex* in the first week outsold her album *Erotica* by \$23 million may be a more accurate indicator that what male fans want from her may have little to do with her musical talent. Indeed, controversial-scholar and feminist-foil Camile Paglia seems on target when she celebrates Madonna as proof of the thesis of her book *Sex, Art, and American Culture* that "woman is the dominant sex" as she possesses a "command of the sexual realm" which has "bewitched and destroyed men since Delilah and Helen of Troy" (one has to wonder if Paglia's statement accurately reflects the feelings of the buyers of *Sex* when the metal cover fell off the cheap spiral binding of their \$49.95 collector's item "investment"). Yet, Cindy Patton's sort of analysis, her bargain-basement feminism, is a model representation of politics over common sense, of the academic agenda outweighing insights into the public

perception and reeks of the distance that academic critics still want to keep from the subject of so-called "low" culture. The rallying call of these critics seems to be "We'll go to the slums, but we'll keep the door locked while we're there." Why else would Naremore and Brantlinger cite Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* (1957) as one of the "founding texts of cultural studies," rather than give the same credit to Leslie Fiedler's vital and engaging *What Was Literature?: Class Culture and Mass Society* (1982), or even the self-reflexivity of Vincent Minnelli's *The Band Wagon* (1953), a subject which Naremore and Brantlinger cover extensively and fascinatingly in their introduction to the collection of essays on modern culture, *Modernity and Mass Culture?*

I draw this comparison between Barthes and Fiedler because the dominant academic acceptance of one (Barthes) over the other (Fiedler) has more to do with what is problematic in cultural studies today than that the latter took his act to the *Merv Griffin Show*, a crossover into "mainstream" America that surely did not enhance Fiedler's academic reputation (imagine, for instance, Barthes stopping in to lend his support to French media-sensation Jerry Lewis's Labor Day Telethon!). First, the difficulty of the language and the thought of the dead French professor ensures a college instructor an ongoing role in teaching his or her students about American popular culture; thus, the study of mass culture is justified by the complexity of the

texts which academics use to explain it. If students can understand a particular text themselves, professors can no longer play the role of gatekeeper and make sure that students are learning to appreciate the "hard" material. The expansion of the canon, in other words, is still limited to the tastes and prejudices of an elite minority. The second indication, a political one, lies in a comparison of the individual critic's explanation of myth. I begin with Fiedler:

I certainly do not mean by myth "a damned lie" (though it is, to be sure, like all fictions, not gospel truth), nor do I employ the term, as a good many others rather confusingly do, as a synonym for "ideology." No matter if it is used in the neutral sense of "a manner or the content of thinking characteristic of an individual, group, or culture," or pejoratively to signify "a sociopolitical program constructed wholly or in part on factitious or hypothetical ideational bases," "ideology" always refers to thinking or ideas, i.e., what is conscious; whereas myth functions on an unconscious or preconscious level. (129-130)

Now, here is Barthes on myth in his *Mythologies*, the "founding text of cultural studies":

It is now possible to complete the semiological definition of myth in a bourgeois society: *myth is depoliticized speech*. One must naturally understand *political* in its deeper meaning, as describing the whole of human relations in their real, social structure, in their power of making the world; one must above all give an active value to the prefix *de-*: here it represents an operational movement, it permanently embodies a defaulting. Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact. In

passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all the dialectics; it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves. (143)

Barthes notes the final sentence and in a sense attempts to "clarify" himself:

To the pleasure-principle of Freudian man could be added the clarity-principle of mythological humanity. All the ambiguity of myth is there: its clarity is euphoric. (143n)

The discussion then turns to politics, naturally, as Barthes tells us that

Yes, myth exists on the Left, but it does not at all have there the same qualities as bourgeois myth. *Left-wing myth is inessential*. It is an incidental myth, its use is not part of a strategy, as is the case with bourgeois myth, but only of a tactics, or, at the worst, of a deviation; if it occurs, it is as a myth suited to a convenience, not to a necessity. (147)

The simple fact that Barthes's notion that so-called bourgeois myth provides "clarity"--that is, that it allows a way for the ruling class to "dupe" the proletariat (remember, myth is an active, an "operational movement")--may be enough to hand him his lofty position within academic discourse. Yet, the idea that the Left does not need to use "myth," simply because it is too in touch with social "reality" certainly seals his fate:

Finally, and above all, [left-wing] myth is, in essence, poverty-stricken. It does not know how to proliferate. It lacks a major faculty, that of fabulizing. As it is expressively put, it remains

barren. This imperfection, if that is the word for it, comes from the nature of the "Left": whatever the imprecision of the term, the Left always defines itself in relation to the oppressed. Now the speech of the oppressed can only be poor, monotonous, immediate. The speech of the oppressed is real; it is a transitive type of speech: it is quasi-unable to lie; lying is a richness, a lie presupposes property, truths and forms to spare. This essential barrenness produces rare, threadbare myths: either transient, or clumsily indiscreet; by their very being, they label themselves as myths, and point to their masks. (148)

While the proletariat, it seems, spends too many hours a day devoted to hard labor to spare the leisure time necessary to possess "language" and "myth" of its own, the bourgeoisie, the right, requires myth's seductiveness for its very survival:

Statistically, myth is on the right. There, it is essential; well-fed, sleek, expansive, garrulous, it invents itself ceaselessly. It takes hold of everything, all aspects of the law, of morality, of aesthetics, of diplomacy, of household equipment, of Literature, of entertainment. The bourgeoisie wants to keep reality without keeping the appearances: it is therefore the very negativity of bourgeois appearance which solicits myth infinitely. The oppressed is nothing, he has only one language, that of his emancipation; the oppressor is everything, his language is rich, multiform, supple, with all the possible degrees of dignity at his disposal. The oppressed makes the world, he has only an active, transitive (political) language; the oppressor conserves it, his language is plenary, intransitive, gestural, theatrical: it is Myth. The language of the former aims at transforming, of the latter at eternalizing. (148-149)

Thus, the language of the bourgeoisie is all "myth" because what the ruling class has available to it is not "real," especially when compared to the Left's knowledge of "real"

social conditions and controls; indeed, this myth-making is yet another way that oppressors oppress the oppressed, a cycle which can be stopped by cultural criticism which shows this process at work for the good of the proletariat.

Fiedler sees the distinction this way:

When I glance at that most staid and longest established of academic journals [*PMLA*], I find indeed that its contributors are now citing more up-to-date names than when I looked last, including Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan, and that many of the essays are now written in the first-person singular instead of the once sacrosanct "objective" third. Far from having learned to speak colloquially as well as autobiographically, however, the contributors have merely replaced one jargon with another, and the new names are cited in the old scholarly form--as if to remind readers that what they are reading is responsible critical discourse rather than merely "imaginative" writing. (109)

In fact, the possession of a specialized set of language, a jargon, as well as a set form of dominant theory, a "myth" of cultural studies, for the post-modern critical movement, may be a possible effort on behalf of the sub-group of academic intellectuals to overcome what they see as their oppressor: mainstream American culture. In other words, the new scholarly discourse empowers such marginalized groups as university professors by allowing them to reverse their roles and oppress the dominant culture by excluding it from the discussion of mainstream culture; that is, it is a simple case of brains over brawn.

Just as the discussion of popular culture has become bogged down in academic-speak and its accompanying agenda,

so too has the idea of what makes popular culture, of what is a popular culture commodity, eluded many discussions aimed at the academic critic who often barks up the wrong commercial tree. Indeed, this product selectivity--all academic critics are trained to favor texts, or products, which reinforce their specific view--for cultural criticism can best be represented by the neglect (which may be too weak a term to accurately reflect the left reaction) given to EIB-network radio personality Rush Limbaugh, who is virtually ignored by the dominant discourse of academic cultural criticism. While his conservative radio talk show can hardly be addressed in typical "left" academic fashion--Limbaugh by no means subverts the dominant ideology; rather, he espouses it, and even without so-called "gaps" for leftist rewriting--the right-wing host without question is one of the more notable of popular culture texts. His rank among the elite of popular culture entertainers is solid indeed: On September 9, 1992, the host announced on his radio show that his book, *The Way Things Ought To Be*, was in stores; later that day, many book shops reported that they had sold out their ordered copies. Besides watching the non-fiction, opinion-filled book make its way to number one on bestseller lists across America, Limbaugh also launched a new television talk show in fall 1992 as well as saw his radio show continue as the single most popular syndicated program in the United States. Rush Limbaugh is without

doubt a popular culture text--what finer example of appealing to the culture of the people than finding success in television, publishing, and radio?--though many academic cultural critics would ignore his mass appeal simply because the Limbaugh text does not lend itself very well to the typically left, what-has-come-to-be-dominant, academic approach.

The question thus arises: Can individuals who are so far removed from the mainstream of culture--remember, academics *know* taste and have been *trained* to appreciate "art"--really participate in mass entertainment? Birmingham Centre heavy John Fiske, whose contributions to cultural studies are often times quite useful and extraordinary as they represent fairly well the good, the bad, and the ugly of the left academic political agenda, offers in his essay "Popular Discrimination" an analysis of the making of popular culture. Fiske starts with a backhanded compliment to the mainstream audience (note here that he separates himself from this audience, while I would insist that I and other cultural studies critics should do everything we can to be counted among them) and asserts that, even though the consumers of capitalist entertainments may not have academic training, the "ability of the people to discriminate between the products of capitalism . . . should never be underestimated" (101). Since many options are available to the consumer who in turn has limited disposal income,

"popular discrimination begins with the choice of which products to use in the production of popular culture and then passes on to the imaginative linking of the meanings and pleasure produced from them with the conditions of everyday life" (101-2). The two key characteristics of popular discrimination are, thus, its "revelance"--that is, "the interconnections between a text and the immediate social situation of its readers"--and its "productivity", or its "functionality" (104). "The popular," he writes, "is functional" (105). Specific texts that appeal to the popular taste, then, become "cultural resource banks" (108). Since the popular reader holds no "reverence for the text but views it as a resource to be used at will" (106) and is concerned "less with the final unity of a text than with the pleasures and meanings that its elements provoke" (107), popular texts should be "treated as unfinished and inadequate in themselves: they are 'completed' only by the productivity of popular readers and by their relevant insertion into readers' everyday lives" (108). Indeed, the reasons that mass entertainments are scorned by highbrow critics--Fiske notes three: their "conventionality," their "superficiality and predictability," and their "failure to offer a challenge"--are precisely what enables these texts "to be taken up and used in the culture of the people" (108). Popular art's challenge to its audience, then, "is not aesthetic but social" (110).

While this process of popular culture seems accurate in its emphasis on the efficient selectivity of the mass audience, including its ability to choose the appropriate texts for its popular culture--think again of how much Rush Limbaugh fits the description here--Fiske still has some need to heighten the political agenda, most likely because he knows the audience *to whom he writes*:

The resources [of popular culture]--television, records, clothes, video games, language--carry the interests of the economically and ideologically dominant; they have lines of force within them that are hegemonic and that work in favor of the status quo. But hegemonic power is necessary, or even possible, only because of resistance, so these resources must also carry contradictory lines of force that are taken up and activated differently by people situated differently within the social system. If the cultural commodities or texts do not contain resources out of which the people can make their own meanings of their social relations and identities, they will be rejected and will fail in the marketplace. *They will not be made popular.* (*Reading the Popular*, 2)

Again, Fiske's surface recognition of the power of the audience to determine its own culture seems valid enough, yet the underlying, between-the-lines message here is the regurgitation of that of the post-structuralist Marxist (indeed, with the collapse of communism, maybe these academic critics should be called post-Marxism Marxists, since they are among the few who still honor the ideas). Even those texts which seemingly support traditional conservative ideology are underwritten by a liberal agenda which can be uncovered by gifted and trained academic minds which understand that the "hope for social and economic

progress should surely be the impetus behind all analysis of popular culture" (Day, "Control" 2).

If the summary of Fiske's essay "Popular Discrimination" represents the good and the long quote from *Reading the Popular* the middle ground or the bad (to stay with the Clint Eastwood Spaghetti Western metaphor), the following excerpt from the final chapter of Fiske's *Understanding Popular Culture*, a chapter aptly titled "Politics," and perhaps even more appropriately one that begins with a section subtitled, "Populism and the Left," most surely is the "ugly":

I have tried in this book to point to the political potential of popular culture, for I believe that such culture is always, at its heart, political. It is produced and enjoyed under conditions of social subordination and is centrally implicated in the play of power in society. But in investigating its politics we must not confine our definition of politics to direct social action, for that is only the tip of the iceberg, resting upon a less visible, but very real, politicized consciousness--the consciousness of, and in, popular culture.

Under certain historical and social conditions this submerged consciousness can break through the surface into visible political action, and this is the focus of this final chapter. I am interested in ways in which the *progressive political potential of popular culture can disrupt the social surface*, and central to my interest are the relationships between macro- and micro-politics, and between *radical and progressive thought and action*. (emphasis mine, 159)

I have placed the emphasis on the phrase and words "progressive political potential of popular culture can disrupt the social surface," "radical," and "progressive thought and action" because in many ways this final sentence

shows what is most wrong with the insistence of the academic political left to propagandize cultural studies as an expression of its own political views. Although I generally agree that "radical" thought is "progressive," I wish that I could agree that popular culture had the potential for shaping the social system in this way, since maybe then I would always cast my vote for the person who ends up being elected president. However, when I think of what I consider popular culture--that is, the indisputable blockbusters of the American entertainment system--I cannot make myself feel comfortable inserting my political views into what are essentially outlets of traditional conservative American ideology.

While the dominant discourse of the academic approach to popular culture leans, unabashedly, to the left, a few cultural studies critics fess up to the possibilities for conservative ideological readings, though they usually do so with some reluctance. Indeed, Stuart Hall claims in "Encoding/Decoding" that the audience may have a "preferred reading" of a specific text, though it may also arrive at alternative or oppositional interpretations. Hall's contention here illustrates not only the left's inability to separate its critical or imaginative writings from its political views, but the concept of a "preferred reading" also reflects back on the state of academic cultural criticism. By its very nature, the preferred academic

reading of alternative or oppositional interpretations excludes analysis which concentrates on the audience's "preferred reading" of a mass culture commodity. William Adams' essay "Vietnam Screen Wars" is surely a case in point. Included in the collection *Culture in an Age of Money: The Legacy of the 1980s in America*, a title that certainly suggests the constant leftist complaint of American society's emphasis on money-making during the Reagan presidency, Adams' piece reflects the hesitation to let the mass audience's "preferred reading" possess the dominate voice in cultural studies criticism. Adams writes,

the Reagan era has bequeathed to us much, including, ironically, a new version of the materialist theory of the politics of culture. The essential claim of this theory is seductively simple: cultural expression reproduces, through all the appropriate "mediation," the topography of social life. In the current version of this theory, the conservative political and social forces of the 1980s have defined the contours of its mass culture. To look in on the movies or television is to see darkly the social foundations of Reaganism: the reaffirmation of "traditional values," the resuscitation of anticommunism, fetishes of the marketplace, the attack on alternative lifestyles. (156-7)

The notion that the Reagan era has provided a conservative "social foundation" that is "reproduced" in mass culture should be obvious, for the era was governed by a collection of individuals who were perhaps the single most successful popular entertainers of the age of the blockbuster: surely, Ronald Reagan's re-election to a second term by the largest landslide in history indicates that his people knew how to

strike a popular chord. However, Adams along with a vast majority of other cultural studies critics will not concede that this reading of popular commodities might be as valid as their "seductively simple" leftist approach. Liberals have never, nor will they ever, understand the mass appeal of those "dark social foundations" of Reaganism.

Not all academic cultural studies criticism is hindered by individual political motives. In *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture*, Andrew Ross writes that while popular culture may contain "elements of disrespect, and even opposition to structures of authority, it also contains 'explanations' for the maintenance of respect for those structures of authority" (3). Like Ross, Robert Root, in *The Rhetoric of Popular Culture: Advertising, Advocacy, and Entertainment*, sees that the conditions under which a text will cross over into the domain of the popular lies in its ability to reinforce existing values in that "all artistic aspects of culture are value laden, sometimes despite themselves" (11), a position which explains quite well the conservative, yet conflicting, morality of many ultra-violent horror and action films. Perhaps, these views that popular culture texts are seemingly simplistic and straightforward about their moral judgements and conservative ideology is precisely what turns typical cultural studies critics away from the texts which are most popular. English Departments, which most often include

cultural criticism, as well as film studies, "always will discriminate against writers (and critics) who have an explicit and simple moral and social agenda" (McCrea 146).

However, the ways in which the products of mass consumption reinforce, endorse, and reflect the agenda that is of primary importance to its consumers is not as simple as it may seem. The process, as Russell A. Berman confirms, is as much a part of the capitalist system of production, of demand and supply, as is any business contract, or for that matter, literary criticism:

Against the eternally returning cultural conservative complaint that the purportedly low quality of popular literature merely reflects the desires of the masses, I will suggest that it was rather the experience of the book industry and its economic forms which led to the specific character of the maligned literature. No matter how literary production and consumption may be reciprocally determined, the nature of production has its own definite consequences: authors who understand themselves as employees dependent on publishing houses with precise marketing strategies will choose to write in certain ways. (57)

Indeed, when the major publishing houses and journals of academic criticism, and the audience for such texts, respond most favorably toward left political interpretations, the notion that this sort of analysis is what will be produced is not all that surprising: Even academics are guilty of giving each other what they know each of them wants. Again, Berman concurs that the manufacturing line does not hold only for items of so-called "low" culture:

Beyond these results, it should also be clear that capitalist literary production--the culture industry--is not simply a matter of the popular literature of mass distribution. Rather, in the age of organized capitalism, the categories of capitalist production are reproduced in all literature, since all texts, high and low, are caught in the same society of commodity exchange and reification. (69)

If the products of academic criticism are "caught" in this "commodity exchange and reification" and in turn represent an effort to discover the position that will sell--that is, the argument that can be marketed best--if the dominant discourse of cultural studies can be celebrated as a "leftist mode of analysis" which accurately reinforces existing political views within the university, if academic criticism as it operates in the post-modern era can claim a homogenous approach and acceptance for its dominant thought, would it then only be as obvious that the products of popular culture can accomplish the same agenda, that it can do the same with its audience, only more so, and on a much larger scale (since these texts reach a much larger audience)?

With this question in mind, Clive Bloom's essay "MacDonald's [sic] *Man Meets Reader's Digest*" is a particularly valuable contribution to the discussion of the function and purpose of cultural criticism. Bloom insists that:

Levi-Strauss and Henry Ford made American mass culture possible. They created a culture which was orientated towards individualised small-scale petit bourgeois and bourgeois *consumption* which

was nevertheless served by the products of large-scale industrialised production: huge conglomerate production geared towards private domestic consumption patterns. It was not the production line that made mass culture possible but the consequence and impetus of the production line, that is, the coming of *standardisation* on a *global* scale. (14)

As if in answer to the typical leftist mode of analysis that what consumers of popular culture want is something different from what they have, Bloom asserts that in fact the opposite is what is true:

MacDonald's destroyed the idea of home cooking in the marketplace. It is not the food that is processed but the customer. The consumer *not the consumed* is standardised. MacDonald's represents the pleasures of the repetition compulsion which is a name Freud gave to industrial man's automatic habits of standardisation. MacDonald's is a *sanctuary against change*, a guarantee of conformity. (14-15)

In other words, consumers do not eat McDonald's for what they do not know, or see, that is, for its "gaps," such as no pickles, or too much ketchup, which in turn would alter the taste of what they have come to expect, of what they *want*; rather, patrons of McDonald's, much like patrons of the popular arts, or even like patrons of academic cultural criticism, return to those products which provide exactly what they provided the previous time they were consumed: all-beef special patties, and the status quo. Bloom puts in this way:

We internalise the disciplines of power and become the subjugated subjects of our own responses to what we *desire to be given* to us in mass culture. (16)

Rather than provide an outlet for repressed urges to go "against the flow," for the desire to overthrow the existing power structure, mass culture is

the creation of a desire and a production process. It comes into being when mass production and standardisation techniques are able to find a mass urban audience whose desires are specialised, domesticated and monetarily satisfiable using techniques of cheap mass communication. It creates a petit bourgeois world of safe interiors filled with the objects we own--it bars the door and acts as a policeman against the world outside. It promotes paranoia at all levels. It penetrates all levels of society piecemeal and is consumed piecemeal, it integrates the highest art with the lowest because all is processed--genred, equalised. It is neither good nor bad nor a condition of modern experience for it is *the* condition of modern experience. (17)

This condition of modern experience also holds true for the standardization of the cultural studies criticism experience. Left theories of post-modern criticism are standardized by, though the preferred term would be "dominated by," a satisfiable agenda whose dominance is as processed as a hamburger from McDonald's; indeed, cultural studies criticism has become "genred" and "equalised."

The inadequacy of most academic criticism to explain American popular culture begs for a search for alternative methods from what seems to be the most logical of sources--the entertainers and products of mass entertainment themselves. Indeed, who better to theorize about the business than the creators and marketers of the products of mass culture? The self-reflexivity of the makers of mass entertainments is certainly more reflective of the modern

experience than most of the offerings of the left-leaning academic critic. Even Naremore and Brantlinger, typical upholders of the sometimes valuable contributions of academic cultural studies, see the importance of specific products of mass culture, for they recognize MGM's 1953 musical *The Band Wagon* as the "culture industry's contribution to the widespread midcentury belief in such things as highcult, midcult, and masscult," though they do not discuss adequately how on target the film's sensibility is for the age of the blockbuster (Introduction 17).

In *The Hollywood Musical*, critic Jane Feuer notes that the MGM musical *The Band Wagon*, in which the well-known song "That's Entertainment" is performed, is a "self-conscious" film whose "reflexivity presents itself most clearly for view" (102). The plot of the film, which details the triumphant comeback of Hollywood song-and-dance man Tony Hunter (Fred Astaire), certainly echoes the predicament that MGM found itself encountering in the 1950s. That is, both Hunter and MGM were at a crossroad: The singer/dancer must make a decision about the direction to take his career while, more significantly, MGM during this historical period toward the end of the Studio Era faces the growing competition from television, the demise of the studio system, the ouster of Louis B. Mayer, and--like Tony Hunter--a decision about the direction it will take as a Hollywood institution. In retrospect, the studio would

probably have been better off if it had learned the lesson presented so succinctly in *The Band Wagon*. This message can be summed up in a relatively minor event from the movie which sees Hunter sell off his high-priced collection of European art work to finance a revamped production of a failed "high" art, experimental, Faustian Broadway musical into a more viewer-friendly extravaganza that Hunter *knows* the audience wants to see. The significance of this message, unfortunately, seems lost on MGM. The studio only needed to look more closely at a sampling of Howard Dietz and Arthur Schwartz's lyrics from the show-stopper "That's Entertainment" to see the direction in which the new Hollywood was headed. Yet, because of copyright laws, I would have to receive permission to reprint more than one line here, which seems ridiculous, especially considering that I will never be given any royalties on the sale of this dissertation. I was told, however, that I could quote one, but only one, line. The entire song is really quite extraordinary in the way that it shows the distinction between high and low art, so I am sorry that you, the reader, will have to look it up yourself if you are interested. (I'm stalling, or filling, here so that I will not have to significantly alter the structure of this report too much.) Well, here is my one line: The song describes *Hamlet* as "some great Shakespearean scene / Where a ghost and a prince meet and everyone ends up in mincemeat" and

asserts that a "show that is really a show / Sends you out with a kind of a glow." These lyrics, indeed the film itself, demonstrate that at least someone at the studio, whether it be director Vincent Minnelli or producer Arthur Freed, or songwriters Dietz or Schwartz, knew what had to be done to keep current with the changing market for Hollywood's product. The film *The Band Wagon* succeeds in its show-business reflexivity so well precisely because it does not blur the line between what is traditionally considered "high" and "low" art. MGM in turn saw its profits falling because, as a studio press release noted in 1948, its direction under new head Dore Schary, who assumed the production helm under the direction of Louis B. Mayer, was to foster "a program of work dedicated to the production of good films about a good world" (Schatz 446).

Indeed, the studio's history at the time *The Band Wagon* was made indicates that MGM should have heeded the advice given in the lyrics from "That's Entertainment!" Although Schary's control of the studio's production list coincided with what is called the "Golden Age" of the Hollywood musical, the Vice President in Charge of Production put forth an effort "to build up more economical genres like the crime thriller and romantic comedy" (447). Producing over half the musicals made from 1946 to 1955, the studio, though, remained committed to the fading genre. By the end of 1955, Schary was ousted as production chief; as

Thomas Schatz writes, "clearly the studio--and the industry at large--no longer had any use of the likes of Dore Schary, or for the kind of filmmaking that he advocated" (462).

More recently, Hollywood yet again finds itself the subject of its own reflexivity. Widely praised by mainstream media critics (though not a great commercial success, probably because it too often bucks the system--that is, it "deconstructs" post-modern blockbuster-making), Robert Altman's *The Player*, based on the novel of the same name by Michael Tolkin, shows a Hollywood at which *The Band Wagon* could only suggest. The film's tongue-in-cheek reflexivity starts with the opening credits, an over-six-minute tracking shot which periodically pans to two studio employees who lament the absence of tracking shots from modern, blockbuster-wanna-be, Hollywood films. The opening shot also includes would-be screenwriters "pitching" their product ideas to the dark, decidedly-un-Hollywood-ideal-of-a-film-hero, studio executive Griffin Mill. One writer's idea is a film with a movie star ("Goldie Hawn" is the suggestion) playing a television star who moves to Africa to perform missionary work; it is "*Out of Africa* meets *Pretty Woman*," the pitch goes. Yet another writer suggests a "psychic, cynically-funny, feel-good, political thriller"; it is "*Ghost* meets *The Manchurian Candidate*" for this pitch. But perhaps no pitch reflects the desperation in studio lots as much as poor Buck Henry offering *The Graduate, Part II*.

The time is 25 years later, and Ben and Elaine are married. Mrs. Robinson lives with them and suffers from alcoholism, or any "malady" of "some sort." Their daughter (Henry figures Julia Roberts fits the bill) is a recent graduate. Though the camera pans away from the conversation, any consumer of Hollywood sequels can figure out the direction the film will take: A sequel is a sequel, which is what makes them work, at least on an economic level (perhaps no better example of this exists than producer Joel Silver's *Die Hard* and *Die Hard II: Die Harder*, which in turn spawned a new "genre" of the lone-hero-takes-on-a-nasty-group-of-terrorists films such as Wesley Snipes in *Passenger 57* and *Under Siege* starring Steven Seagal).

The self-reflexivity of *The Player* lies most directly in Mill's life as it becomes the center of the film. Not only is Griffin stalked by a writer who threatens to kill him--Mill's life has become like the "trash" that Hollywood produces, in this case, a stalk-and-slash film--but he also murders an unproduced writer with a "high-art" sensibility, much as, so Altman's argument would seem to be, the film industry itself has been killing off the notions of cultural aesthetics, especially in modern-day film-making. However, Altman says that the studios are not to blame; *Entertainment Weekly* quotes the director on his film:

Going after Hollywood is pretty easy. That isn't what this picture is at all. If anything, the target of this movie is the audience. They're the ones that are responsible for lousy movies.

Indeed, in an executive meeting in *The Player*, one studio whiz asks the rhetorical question, "Who wrote the ending of *Fatal Attraction*?" to which he himself answers, "The audience, that's who." (Recall that *Fatal Attraction* was originally produced with a different, darker ending in which the Michael Douglas character was killed by his lover played by Glenn Close. Test screenings revealed that this was not the ending that the audience wanted, so Hollywood did what it is best at doing: A new ending was reshot, and the film went on, as the studio executive in *The Player* points out, to gross \$300 million world-wide, which he also insists is what is really most important.) Indeed, the elements needed to successfully market a film, in Griffin's words to the murdered writer's girlfriend just before they make love, are "suspense, laughter, violence, hope, heart, nudity, sex, happy endings, mainly happy endings," all of which *The Player* diabolically delivers.

The film within the film in *The Player* reinforces the depth of its self-reflexivity. Griffin is pitched an idea by a New York producer and British director for an anti-death-penalty film, which in the director's vision would be made without stars, because this film would be about "reality." Moreover, a woman who was mistakenly found guilty of murdering her husband would be killed in the electric chair just before the D.A. who convicted her becomes convinced of her innocence. Yet, when the film is

made, the woman is played by Julia Roberts who is rescued at the last minute by none other than Bruce Willis; when asked what happened to "reality," the British director, the gatekeeper of high art, replies, "This is reality; this is a HIT!" A collage of the high-concept mentality as it runs amuck in Hollywood, *The Player* tells it like it is: The entertainment industry's new program of work is dedicated to the marketing potential of products--whether they be good or bad (indeed, a needless distinction)--to a consuming world with dollars to spend on leisure entertainment.

If Altman's in-the-know account seems a cynically protective assessment of the situation (that is, do not blame the messenger, blame the messagee), consider MCA/Universal Motion Picture Group Chairman Thomas Pollock's comment on the new NC-17 rating, which was supposedly created so that filmmakers could explore adult themes in adult films:

NC-17 movies do not fit into our main business plan. By and large, we are designing movies as entertainment for large audiences. That is our mandate.

Along the same lines, here is an entertainment update from *USA Today's* Life section, which sees yet another high-level Hollywood figure making the sort of decisions that she is paid to make:

1991's *Father of the Bride*, a remake of the 1950 hit, was so successful Touchstone Pictures has signed filmmakers Nancy Meyers and Charles Shyer to a two-picture deal, one of which is a *Father of the Bride* sequel. The original *Father* also had a

sequel, *Father's Little Dividend* in 1951, and Meyers says the modern sequel will be "loosely based" on that one, although it might not be called *Father's Little Dividend*--"Our 11-year-old said, 'What does that mean?'" Meyers says.

Meyer's anecdote at the end contains as much truth about modern-day Hollywood as any quote can. Her isn't-that-cute punch-line shows the extent to which the industry's products are geared toward audience and marketing, as well as that the tastes of an 11-year-old, the tastes of what some might call the lowest common denominator, are central. In fact, Francis Ford Coppola sums up Hollywood when he comments at the end of Eleanor Coppola's *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse*, a documentary on the making of her husband's film *Apocalypse Now*, that

To me, the great hope is, that now these little 8-mm and video recorders and stuff, have come around . . . some just people who normally wouldn't make movies, are gonna be making them . . . and make a beautiful film, and for once, the so-called "professionalism" about movies will be destroyed, forever, . . . and it will really become an "art" form.

Coppola, as his wife's documentary shows, has become frustrated by the interference that the economic side of film-making has inflicted on his production of so-called art. One has to wonder how the artistic minds behind the plethora of westerns being produced on the heels of the success of Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* feel when they hear producer Denise Di Novi (*Batman Returns*) admit that if the first two or three new films to be released fail with the audience, meaning they do not make money, that Hollywood

would "send the Western South again." Or, moreover, how Coppola feels about the prospects for his "art" knowing that Controlled Entropy Entertainment, Inc., has introduced "Interfilm," an interactive film technology which allows moviegoers to "direct" a film by voting together and changing the plot at the touch of a button.

Hollywood, though, does not hold a patent on working long and hard to meet audience expectations; all segments of the entertainment industry understand their mandate: Please the consumer, so the product will be a success. Even the publishing industry--the makers of books! and literature! and literary criticism!--are geared primarily by business principles. Author Stephen Coonts (*Flight of the Intruder*), who can at best be said to occupy a position just below that of the blockbuster entertainers, offers the following multi-leveled incident of unabashed reflexivity. In his 1990 novel *Under Siege*, Coonts details, as the dust-jacket states, the "immediate and gripping" (as fine terms for popular culture commodities and their position in the daily life of Americans as any) events of the drug war as it moves into the nation's capital. One of the heroes of the novel, Jack Yocke, meets and makes love with--in the same night, of course--a female bookstore owner, Tish. Yocke and Tish offer up this smorgasbord the next morning:

"Get dressed and run me home. I have to get a little sleep, then be down here scrubbed and cheerful to open this place at nine. That's when the little old ladies like to come in to see if we

have any new 'spicy' books."

"'Spicy'?"

"Bodice rippers. Soft-core porn. That's what pays the rent around here."

"You're kidding."

"I wish I were. I sold three Amy Tans last year and just one Fay Weldon. It's enough to make you cry."

"Maybe you need a better location."

"What I need is to write a sizzling world-class fuck book, one so hot it'll melt an old maid's panties." She eyed him as she buttoned her blouse. "That's what I'm scribbling on. You want to see it?"

"Sure."

Tish opened the desk drawer and pulled it out. She had about a hundred pages of manuscript that she had whacked out on the old typewriter on the corner of her desk. He flipped through the pages, scanning.

"The rule is no four-letter words. His cock is always his love member."

"Looks fine to me," Yocke said, and handed it back. He bent down to retrieve his trousers.

When he straightened up she was reading carefully. After a moment she tossed the pile of paper back in the drawer. "It's shit, I know, but that's what sells. And goddamn, if shit sells, that's what I'm going to write." (159-160)

This passage operates on eight cylinders. Not only do we hear Coonts's belief in, and recognition of, his craft, we also witness his expert skill at work: The scene discusses precisely what his novel itself does. The creed seems to be, give the audience what it wants, or do not bother putting the product on the shelf. The mandate is one that can be found wherever entertainment dollars are to be made, and most successful producers of popular entertainment understand and deliver.

James Michener's *The Novel* is yet another self-reflexive text on a popular artist's creative process. *The*

Novel is broken into four parts--The Writer, The Editor, The Critic, and The Reader--as it details the making of a popular entertainment. The writer, Lucas Yoder, authors popular fiction about the Pennsylvania Dutch community in which he lives. The sections on the editor and the critic give the account of the role of these people in the life of the entertainment. Last, The Reader, who in the structure of the text occupies the final section of the novel, where incidentally Michener's plot also takes off, is recognized for her role in the creation of the popular text. When a young writer who has become involved with the four main characters suffers from writer's block, she turns to The Reader for help:

I had no idea why she wanted to talk with me, but Timothy explained: "Grandmother, Jenny's finished her football novel, but New York thinks polishing is needed and everyone's been giving her advice. Streibert did, he was her professor. I did, I'm her professor now. And Ms. Marmelle keeps heaping it on."

"After that exalted barrage, what could I possibly contribute?"

"A great deal, the capstone possibly. I mean, you're the only one of us, including Yvonne, who's a reader. You consume books, you don't write them. Jenny could profit from your touch."

Naturally, The Reader, who indeed should be more "exalted" than either the author, the editor, or even the professor when the creation of a popular culture text is on the line, offers the suggestion which clears up the writer's block and leads the text towards its final product.

Perhaps no one in publishing understands, and

profits from, this mandate better, though, than best-selling author Stephen King. His 1987 novel *Misery*, as well as the 1990 Rob Reiner film, reflects on the entertainer/audience co-creation as skillfully as Altman's *The Player*. On one level, the novel is a standard psychological thriller, complete with King's trademark prose and seemingly out-of-control violence. But King's reflection on the author-audience interaction makes *Misery* stand out. In short, the thrills come from the turbulent relationship between bestselling author, Paul Sheldon, and his "Number One" fan, Annie, a nurse who holds Sheldon hostage until he writes a book just for her in which he brings back her favorite character, Misery Chastain. To say that their relationship is rather odd is an understatement; when Sheldon does not produce the novel Annie wants, she takes an axe and slowly cuts him apart. Indeed, Annie knows that a popular author cannot survive without his "co-author," the audience. She tells Sheldon that he "owes" her his "life" (16), and she forces him to "change" his book and make it "right" (98).

Sheldon too knows that he owes his popular success to fans like Annie. He considers her the "perfect audience" (57) and tells her that "a person might as well not write a book at all, if there's no one around to read it" (161). Consider as well what Sheldon thinks about the fan mail he received when he killed off Misery:

The tone of [the] letters varied from
bewilderment(that always hurt the most somehow),

to reproach, to outright anger, but the message was always the same: *It wasn't what I expected, it wasn't what I wanted.* (25)

And the message is also clear: Publish the "story" that the public demands, instead of trying to create the demand. King and his publishers know exactly what American consumers want and need, and based on his sales record for the past 15 years, the Master of the Macabre, as King has been called, certainly does give it to them.

No entertainment industry may be as self-reflexive, though, as the medium that exercises the prime location on the nation's cultural mantelpiece--namely, television. Indeed, the "vast American wasteland" as an entertainment medium represents the democraticization of popular culture perhaps more than any other media industry. In a weekly vote (the Nielsen Ratings), audiences tell the network executives, the cable companies, the local stations, the advertisers, what it is they want to see. Although its audience is vast and heterogenous--witness how some shows succeed based solely on their demographics--those shows that are most popular, the shows that rate in the top 10 or 20, year in and year out, must cross over to wide and varied tastes. They have to; too many other options are available to pull the audience away, and the selections, the distractions, are about to multiply. Cable-network Discovery Channel founder and chairman John Endricks has announced his company's plans for Your Choice TV, a remote-

control-assessable program which will allow consumers, in Endricks's words, to "finally have what they want." In essence, Your Choice TV allows viewers to watch programs on demand by providing a wide assortment of programs aired over both the commercial and cable networks. Likewise, in Orlando, Florida, the magical home of Disney World, Time Warner has begun application of an "electronic superhighway," which will afford television viewers hundreds of channels, movies on demand, interactive television, home shopping malls, video games, and even the ability to make phone calls through the cable system if regulators permit it.

Though I intend to focus more intensely on the publishing and film industries in the following chapters, showing how much these traditional outlets for artistic expression have come to be dominated by the culture and business of television, I have briefly introduced these concepts here because they are integral to the direction I want to take in re-viewing the "materialist" theory of mass culture. As it stands now, this theory claims that popular culture is all about money and manipulation. Surely, no one would argue with the role that profit plays in the process of popular culture. However, the dominant academic notions of manipulation--summarized on the right as the destruction of "high" art by "low" art and on the left as the way that the "culture industry" creates audience expectations,

desires, and needs--does not consider the business realities of the entertainment industries. Although some academics will admit that industry production and audience needs may exist in some sort of reciprocity, the general sense from both the left and the right is that the audience sits around passively attending films Hollywood wants them to see, reading books that are dispensed from large cardboard displays, and flipping through the dial looking to be mesmerized by whatever appears on the screen before them.

The truth of the matter is this: Neither the audience, nor the producers of entertainments, are passive participants in the production of popular culture. In fact, the audience is the *greater* manipulator of the two. How many films that Hollywood wants us to see--many of which are even considered "well-made"--open and close within one week? If a film does not "open big," it is gone, with no time to "manipulate" its audience. How many first novels are openly displayed at book stores and on supermarket check-out aisles? The only titles and authors which receive this royal treatment are those that the audience has already indicated a willingness to buy. Indeed, the audience's manipulation of the publishing industry has become so great that little room even exists for new authors to test the market waters, and when new authors are successful at this, it is because the audience finds them, not because they find

the audience. (Consider, for instance, John Grisham, and what happened to his first novel, *A Time to Kill*, which he incidently considers his "best" to date, after his second book, *The Firm*, became a blockbuster hit. The former was re-released and shot to number one on the bestsellers list. Who is being manipulated by whom here?) How many "quality" television programs--*Twin Peaks* comes to mind--are celebrated for the new dimension, or look, or challenge, they bring into our living rooms, but are gone from dial before that fast-talking pitchman could say "*I Witness Video*," or "*America's Funniest People*?"

While I do not wish to invalidate the clever and imaginative "alternative" readings that academics usually produce, I do want to assert that these marginalized political expressions do not have much to say about American popular culture in the Age of the Blockbuster. The consumers of mass entertainment do not want change, and they do not care about "radical feminism and theories of social difference." They want something, anything, that satisfies them that their time and money was well spent. They want to be entertained, and the best approach to, the best view of, popular culture is to see, and to try to understand, those commodities by which the consumers choose to be entertained. As Sylvester Stallone said on *Oprah* to Oprah Winfrey and her studio and television audience when asked about his

commercial success versus his critical reputation, "Sixty-million satisfied customers can't be wrong."

CHAPTER 2

SKELETONS IN THE CLOSET: STEPHEN KING'S FAMILY FRIGHTS

Why is it that if I read a lot of books, I am considered well read, but if I watch a lot of television, I am not well viewed?

Lily Tomlin, in her 1977 one-woman Broadway performance

By my count there were seven great shows [in the 1987 Top 10 Nielsens ratings], two good ones, and one that's merely mediocre. Compare those shows to the books on a recent *New York Times* list of best-sellers, filled with trashers and romancers by the likes of Danielle Steele, Sidney Sheldon and Stephen King. The obvious conclusion: TV viewers have better taste than readers.

Jeff Jarvis, then television critic for *People*

The decade of change within, the shift in status of, the publishing industry reflected in the quotes by Tomlin and Jarvis has been lamented by distressed gatekeepers of high culture since the line that separated literature and books from other mass entertainments began to blur. To be sure, the continental gap between publisher's row in New York and studio city in Hollywood has eroded so much so that today the latest paperback bestseller can barely be distinguished from the newest video release. Once considered among the elite of the American cultural industries, the printing press has fallen from its lofty

roost: the publishing business has come to be as much geared by profit and marketing, by supply and demand, by name brand recognition and formula--that is, by the essence of show biz--as show biz itself. New American Library's co-founder and editor-in-chief Victor Weybright put it this way to an industry colleague: "I don't care how bold the book is if it's in the grade 'A' literary category and can be justified artistically, nor do I care how bold a book is if it promises to sell millions."

Most of the accounts of this usurpation of print from what Lewis A. Coser, Charles Kadushin, and Walter W. Powell (*Books: The Culture and Commerce of Publishing*) romantically call the "gatekeepers of ideas" (4) to people with the show biz mentality of profit, profit, profit, are nostalgic for the time when publishers published "art for art's sake" and not Pocket Books for the pocketbook's sake. Here, for instance, is John Tebbel, author of *Between Covers: The Rise and Transformation of Book Publishing in America*, on the decline and fall of publishing in the United States:

While publishing may never have been quite the "profession for gentlemen" it was widely believed to be, it was a unique kind of business. Its chief ingredient was a love of the printed page, of the book. People in publishing liked the feel of the book in the hand, and they were almost all inveterate readers, from the publisher himself on down. The joy of finding a manuscript that was deemed worthy of publication was shared by everyone involved. When readers felt the same way, those who had made it possible were delighted. If it failed in the marketplace, there

was some sorrow, but seldom regret for having published it. Authors and editors often formed close friendships, and many stayed united for years. Publishing, in short, was like a small town where everyone knew everyone else and felt a kinship that was not to be found in ordinary commercial enterprises. (462-463)

Just as the bulldozers moved in and disturbed the tranquil town meetings on the neighbor's front porch, the conglomerates and their executives took over the publishing industry and if what they found

did not fit the conventional business pattern, they would, by God, make it fit. If it meant thinking of books in terms of sales rather than merit, they were ready to construct such a list. When a *Wall Street Journal* reporter asked the buyer for a major bookstore chain recently what he looked for, he was told that the first consideration was a "brand name," and that there were some books which it was not necessary to read at all, thus reducing books to a kind of commodity trading in which the content was largely unimportant. (463)

According to Tebbel, the "tilt" of the industry is "in the direction of mass production and consumption," so much so in fact that chain book stores such as Walden Books and B. Dalton are "the largest buyers of books from publishers;" thus, these consumer-friendly stores, with their convenient mall locations, "virtually" determine the product which is produced, "since every house quite naturally wants to sell as many of its titles as possible" (463).

Tebbel's tone of distress regarding the state of the industry--"For some time now," he writes, "it has not been uncommon to find editors who know how to order wine and food in a good restaurant at expense account luncheons but who

seldom read a manuscript thoroughly, if at all"--seems a bit naive in the age of blockbuster entertainments; his disdain, his old-fashioned view of "we," arbiters of taste, versus "they," the mass-market philistines, clearly takes on the nostalgic tone of his version of better days when literature was literature and pulp was pulp: The "function" of today's executive boils down to their mission "to provide ideas for books and keep profitable authors happy" (464). The image of the starving artist, the would-be novelist, has been replaced by the multi-million dollar contract and capitalism is to blame. Indeed, the new publishing philosophy is but an adaptation of big business and its priorities as it has "imposed" the

corporate mentality on a business diametrically opposed to it in the past. Money and power, the key words of the eighties, have never been consistent with the character of book publishing until now. The corporations owning publishing houses recruit more and more, particularly for upper-level jobs, from the ranks of nonbook businesses. (464)

The production of America's publishing houses, Tebbel wants his readers to know, "are looked upon as simply another kind of article to be marketed," as if mass consumers are so easily manipulated that they are incapable of deciding upon which leisure activities they would rather spend their money. What Tebbel fails to recognize is that the businesses and their corporate executives are not behind the changes in the publishing industry. Rather, book consumers are no longer interested in the sort of product that Tebbel

and his gatekeepers would prefer. The industry has not change because it *wanted* change; it has changed because it *had* to change.

That Tebbel seems so shocked by the modern agenda of the publishing industry is certainly surprising, especially considering his introduction to Thomas L. Bonn's *Under Cover: An Illustrated History of American Mass Market Paperbacks*. In this introduction, Tebbel recognizes what has happened to the business of books. He notes the over-a-century-old print "revolution" which was fueled by the growth of the paperback book from a time decades before the Civil War, during which the market for pocket-sized books had become such a part of the American consumer's diet that so-called "addicts" demanded that "bales of paperbacks be shipped to camps of the Union Army," to the present day in which these cheaper, more readily available "texts" have "come to dominate trade publishing and to be an increasingly valuable adjunct to nearly every other branch of the industry" (9-10).

When Pocket Books founder Robert de Graff issued his first ten Pocket Books, he said, "I am convinced that the mass American public wants the best in books at irresistibly low prices, with almost universal distribution." He was correct: His mission to market 25-cent editions of "proven seller" on newsstands and in drugstores--including James Hilton's *Lost Horizon* and Agatha Christie's *The Murder of*

Roger Ackroyd, as well as *Five Great Tragedies* by William Shakespeare and *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte--paid off with sales of 3 million copies in less than a year. Within 10 years (1949), sales had increased to 175 million, then exceeded 250 million just three years later in 1952. By 1979, 535 million units were sold, and paperback publishers' receipts came in at slightly over \$600 million.

The paperback has found its niche in the blockbuster marketplace. Coser, et al., mention in *Books: The Culture and Commerce of Publishing* that two to three hundred new paperbacks are released every month. Produced with the consumer in mind, mass-market paperbacks are

characterized by their size (4 inches by 7 inches), their design for easy display on book racks, their glossy covers, their mode of distribution, and--unless they are extremely successful--their short lifespan. If the books do not sell promptly, they are removed from the display racks and replaced by a new crop. (355)

The distribution of the mass market paperback, according to Thomas L. Bonn (*Under Cover: An Illustrated History of American Mass Market Paperbacks*), can be described as "akin to magazine sales." He writes that all paperback houses

base their success on the distribution of a wide range of titles, in rack-size, softcover format, which are printed at high speed in quantities usually exceeding 100,000 copies. These publications are issued in monthly blocks, and 50 percent or more are sold to some 450 independent wholesale distributors for resale in more than 150,000 retail outlets in the United States and Canada. (21)

The assembly-line production and the method of distribution of the paperback text allow for the mass audience to co-opt the role of the gatekeeper and "operate" Coser's "sluice gate," deciding in essence what "will be offered" and "what will be excluded" (*Books*, 4).

Kenneth C. Davis (*Two-Bit Culture: The Paperbacking of America*) argues that the changes in the publishing industry over the course of the past two or three decades--that is, the time in which the inexpensive paperback has been made available to a large number of consumers--has "democratized" literature. Here is Davis's version of these changes: In the 1960s paperbacks came to dominate the book market; thus, the business philosophy of the paperback factories came to control the publishing industry as a whole. In the late 1960s, the industry conglomeratized and the quest for profit, the blockbuster complex, became the order of the day. The revolution of the publishing industry was over, and the "democratic" vote was in. The familiar names had been elected, and to the victor--at the beginning of the 1980s, eight companies, including Bantam Books, Dell, New American Library (NAL), and Fawcett, accounted for 75 percent of domestic paperback sales--went the spoils: the brand-name, best-selling authors who lent their talent, their mass appeal, to the coming of the age of the blockbuster in the publishing industry.

As with any economically successful packaging of a product for the consumer market, the blockbusters of the publishing industry rely on brand names. In the mid-1970s, such authors as Peter Benchley, Louis L'Amour, Danielle Steele, Alex Haley, Eric Seagal, Colleen McCollough, Robin Cook, Erica Jong, Stephen King, John D. MacDonald, and Mario Puzo, to name a few, rose to the top of the bestseller lists, as well as to the top of the profession. These authors paved the road for the age of the blockbuster with now well-known (and still popular) titles such as *Jaws*, *The Exorcist*, *Love Story*, *Coma*, *The Godfather*, *Carrie*, *The Shining*, *The Thorn Birds*, and *Roots*. Indeed, McCollough's *The Thorn Birds* (1977) is typical of a 1970s paperback blockbuster. After finding a hefty market with the well-received hardcover edition, the historical romance from down-under established a then-record for paperback reprint rights when Avon paid the blockbuster-like sum of \$1.9 million. Then, in an effort to be sure they gave the public exactly what they wanted, the company surveyed likely readers of the novel for their input about possible paperback covers. An Avon executive described the market test this way:

Consumers rejected a version that focused on the book's romantic couple (it cut out the men and looked too much like a historical romance), and an edition of the hardcover jacket (too cold and literary in the smaller paperback size). The majority favored a cover with the Cleary family and their land under the big sky.

The Thorn Birds also became a crossover hit. Its lasting value, its status as a blockbuster, was certainly enhanced by its television mini-series adaptation, which still ranks among the five most-watched event series in Nielsen ratings history. Moreover, ABC's 1993 repeat of the over 10-year-old tie-in performed strongly, as most of its episodes placed in the Top 10 for the week and usually won their night. Adaptations are surely one of the best advertising sources for the always-available paperback edition of blockbuster novels. One publishing executive, who obviously has been keeping *his* eye on the rise of the blockbuster, reportedly told the *New York Times* that the "future of the paperback lies in show biz."

The cyclical food chain among the major cultural industries of publishing, film, television, and music has come to dominate the way art is produced in modern culture. Books are adapted into films. Movies are novelized. *Wayne's World* and *Coneheads* go from Saturday night television to Friday night theater premieres. MTV's music videos are the definitive hybrid entertainment. Madonna provides *Sex* for Warner Books. Yet, the entertainment enterprise that *needs* to rely most heavily on the other media is clearly publishing. Thomas Bonn (*Under Cover: An Illustrated History of American Mass Market Paperbacks*) has this to say about the paperback's "future" in show biz:

Huge movie and television incomes, phenomena of the 1970s, have changed the face of twentieth-

century general book publishing. Today, hardcover publishers are frequently accused of issuing particular books for the sole purpose of gaining substantial advances from softcover publishers--not of selling the books themselves. A sizable paperback sale can generate still more income through the attention the softcover edition captures from television and film producers. In recent years the sale of softcover reprint rights has frequently been sufficient to generate a television or movie purchase before a hardcover edition is even published. (19)

In 1982, entertainment-minded giants such as CBS, MCA, and Warner Bros. each controlled one or more mass market lines. In 1993, MacMillan began a new division, Otto Penzler Books, which would only publish mystery novels, and Warner Bros. paid author Michael Crichton, whose first book was published in the late 1970s, but also whose *Jurassic Park* spawned the second-highest grossing film in Hollywood's history, \$3.5 million for a manuscript he had not finished. Before the ink on Crichton's unprecedented contract had dried, early 1990s publishing superstar John Grisham was paid \$3.75 million for movie rights to a novel he had not yet written (a Universal Pictures production, the film, at the time of the rights sale, was expected to be directed by Ron Howard--imagine, the sale of the rights, and the director established, even before the product itself is produced). Certainly, Mary Anne's Gilligan's Island Cookbook is an extreme example of the industry's abandonment of its traditions.

The business of publishing has been forced to come to terms with modern technology and culture. A computer

generates a novel, ironically titled *Just This Once* (though not if sales are good), based on the popular fiction of bestseller Jacqueline Susann. Released by Carol Publishing Group's Birch Lane Press, the bodice-ripper is the "brain-child" of a computer, which was armed with artificial "intelligence" and programmed to "think" as Suzanne. Moreover, author E.L. Doctorow (*Ragtime*) and his partners have begun a new cable channel called Booknet. Airing 24-hours a day, the channel will be devoted exclusively to books. Programming will include author profiles, interviews, readings, and publishing industry news, as well as call-in shows with authors and feature movies based on books. Plus, the plans call for a 24-hour shopping service which will enable viewers to purchase books featured on air.

Clearly, the publishing industry remains a major player in the age of the blockbuster, in the creation and distribution of popular art, and just as clearly, the changes in the industry which have reinforced its financial claim have been, and will continue to be, dictated by the audience for leisure entertainments. Today's modern technology, computer advances, and sluggish economy have forced publishing houses into an increasingly competitive market. In fact, a survey of 16,000 American households was conducted between April 1990 and March 1991. Sponsored by the American Booksellers Association, the Association of American Publishers, and the Book Industry Study Group and

supervised by the NPD Group, the study was to determine a sense of the market, a feel for the audience, as well as the book-buying habits of the reading public. The result that disturbed observers most was that 60 percent of the surveyed households reported that they had not purchased a single book in a given year. Senior vice president of the Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Stuart Applebaum remarks,

There are a lot of things going on in the culture that may prevail against books competing for the dollars allotted for movie going, video renting, and CD buying. But if we didn't think that we could successfully stake out our books against the other media, we probably wouldn't be here.

The publishing industry therefore pays attention to the information supplied by such surveys as the NPD's (see Table 2-1). That so-called "popular fiction" outsold the second

Table 2-1: Percentage of Book Sales by Category

Popular Fiction	66%
General Non-Fiction	9%
Cooking/Crafts	7%
Psychology	3%
Religious	3%
Technology/Science/Education	2%
Art/Literature/Poetry	2%
Reference	2%
Travel	1%
Other	5%

Source: The NPD Group, Inc.

bestselling category of books, General Non-Fiction, by seven to one suggests that the most successful way for publisher's to stake their books out against the other media is to

continue to produce a product that can go head-to-head, and hand-in-hand, with those media.

The superstars of the publishing industry are few--Tom Clancy, Danielle Steele, and John Grisham are three who come immediately to mind--but these individuals, along with select others, are responsible for bringing millions, not thousands, of consumers into bookstores. With nearly 80 percent of published books resulting in financial failures, this breed of entertainer has become more and more important to industry executives as they fight for their share of the competitive entertainment market. The case can be made that the superstar of the publishing industry since the rise of the blockbuster mentality, the author to whom all other mega-sellers are often compared, is master-horror-writer Stephen King. Thomas Bonn (*Heavy Traffic and High Culture: New American Library as Literary Gatekeeper in the Paperback Revolution*) says of the prodigious author:

In the second half of the seventies, NAL began publishing the suspense fiction of Stephen King. Since that time his fiction has generated a large portion of NAL's total sales, a domination that resembles earlier company sales of Caldwell, Spillane, and Fleming. (226-7)

Indeed, perhaps no other author has given the conglomerates and their executives more of what they want than King. In *Bare Bones: Conversations on Terror with Stephen King*, America's favorite horror writer reflects, "Of all the questions I'm asked, the most difficult is, 'How does it feel to be famous?' Since I'm not, that question

always catches me with a feeling of surrealism." Contrary to what he may think, or say, or wish, Stephen King is famous; at the very least, he has outlived the fifteen minutes that Andy Warhol promised us all. His fame is certainly obvious to any person who picks up printed material other than the phone book, who turns on that vast American "wasteland" television, who ventures to the modern public living room, the cinema duplex 10, or who happened upon the Royal Shakespeare Company's short-lived production of *Carrie* at Stratford-on-Avon or on Broadway. Yes, in spite of himself, Stephen King is famous. In fact, *Time* magazine, in its 1986 cover story "King of Horror," proclaims that King "seems to be the country's best-known writer. When he appeared on an American Express commercial to ask onlookers 'Do you know me?,' the answer was obvious: Of course, they did." With an estimated eighty million copies of his books in print--two of which, *Carrie* and *The Dead Zone*, were presented by Nicholas Daniloff to his Soviet friend Misha minutes before the former was arrested as an American spy--and with a 1989 four-book contract with Viking/NAL estimated at a figure somewhere between \$30 and \$40 million (called the largest guarantee in the history of publishing), King enjoys what are perhaps the two most significant indicators of fame: mass recognition and a great deal of money. And, in a time where much emphasis is placed on such things, what greater fame than to be the most

successful, in terms of public awareness and monetary gain, in your profession? When pressed, even the self-labelled stylist of the "Sears catalog with a plot" would have to agree that he is famous.

Often times, though, so-called gatekeepers would like to believe that fame such as King's is fleeting; it is only a matter of time, they usually maintain, before the current media child will grow old and die and be replaced by the birth of yet another darling. With King, though, this certainly is not the case. In fact, scholar-cum-godfather of the popular arts Leslie Fiedler told a recent gathering of the "Aging Avant-Garde," including such post-modernist figures as John Hawkes, Donald Barthelme, and William Gass, that "None of us will be remembered as long or revered as deeply as our contemporary Stephen King." In spite of the fact that certain "writers became furious and insulted" by the remark and threatened to boycott dinner (a response which prompted Fiedler to offer what could best be called a tentative retraction) Fiedler's point was made. Stephen King--best seller *par excellence*, popular figure extraordinaire, "Brand Name" phenomenon--has amassed so large a loyal audience that his impact on American culture cannot be ignored.

Since 1974, King arguably has become the *most* popular author on the American cultural scene, as well as establishing the publishing industry as a profession that

can make "blockbusters," or "superstars," just like Hollywood. From the entertainment news to the op-ed pages, King ranks among the foremost media sensations of the last three decades of the 20th century. For instance, King's name surfaces far more often than most of his colleagues, although others--Grisham, Clancy and Steele, to name a few--also receive their share of cross-industry consumption, a source of income for which they owe King at least some thanks.

From the film adaptation of *Carrie* in 1976 to the 1993 version of *The Dark Half*, virtually all of King's novels have been made into, or at least optioned for, feature-length films. Additionally, many of his short stories have provided the basis for Hollywood concepts; in fact, every story--with the single exception of "Jerusalem's Lot"--from his first collection of short stories, *Night Shift*, have been optioned. Three novels (*'Salem's Lot*, *The Stand*, and *It*) have been converted into television miniseries, and King produced the original teleplay for CBS television's critically-acclaimed *The Golden Years* (ironically, or maybe not, television seems a more King-friendly medium than film has been thus far). In fact, Stephen King is a cottage industry unto himself: he not only generates income for his publishers by releasing his own books, but also over thirty books about America's best-selling author have been published. The overall media

record is impressive indeed. In short, King has published 35 books, has had 7 screenplays produced, and has as well provided material for 24 television/film adaptations, along with 47 audio-tape releases--and each of these figures changes nearly every month.

King, though, is an even greater phenomenon in the publishing industry itself. From the mid-1970s to late 1980s, he has dominated bestsellers lists across the country, as well as on an international scale. More than any other example, these lists--just as the Nielsen's for television or the top box office grossers for the movie industry--are perhaps the strongest evidence of King mass appeal, and in turn, his significance to any study of modern culture. Widely regarded as the most influential of the numerous public records of top selling novels, the *New York Times Book Review* bestseller's list is a weekly compilation of the top-selling fiction and non-fiction hardcovers, paperbacks, and trade editions.

The *New York Times* bases its lists "on computer-processed sales figures from 3000 books stores and from representative wholesalers with more than 28,000 other retail outlets, including variety stores and supermarkets." What King has done on this list is nothing short of remarkable. For instance, in the period from August 1976, when the paperback edition of *'Salem's Lot* became the first King novel to rank in the top ten, to December 1992, at

least one of his titles has been ranked on the list over 70 percent of the time. In fact, for two weeks in November 1985, King became the first author in publishing history to have five books on the hardcover, paperback, and trade edition lists at the same time (King has accomplished this feat more than once; most recently, the hard cover reissue of *The Stand*, as well as the first release of the collection, *Four Past Midnight*, plus the paperbacks, *The Dark Half*, *Misery*, and *It*, appeared together on the two lists for five weeks in the beginning of 1991).

The facts of King's unique commodification do not end there. At least one King title has held the number one hardcover or paperback position for about 20 percent of the time over the course of the last 17 years, and he has had multiple titles on the lists over 35 percent of the weeks during the same period. King often reigns atop both lists, holding the number one positions for hardcover and paperback editions. From May 25, 1986, to May 1, 1988, at least one of his novels was on either the hardcover or paperback list for an uninterrupted 102 weeks. Impressive, too, is the number of weeks each novel has remained on the lists (Table 2-3).

King has not only been successful in crossing over into other media and in sending release after release to the top of the bestseller's lists, he has as well singlehandedly changed the way publishers market their product. For

Table 2-3: Stephen King Titles on *N.Y. Times* Bestseller List

TITLE	HARDCOVER	PAPERBACK
CARRIE (1974)		12
'SALEM'S LOT (1975)		14 (2)*
THE SHINING (1977)	1	26
THE STAND (1978)	3	17 (1)
NIGHT SHIFT (1979)		13
THE DEAD ZONE (1979)	32 (2)	14 (4)
FIRESTARTER (1980)	35 (3)	12 (4)
DANSE MACABRE (1981)	5	
CUJO (1981)	34 (5)	9 (2)
DIFFERENT SEASONS (1982)	32 (3)	13
CHRISTINE (1983)	32	14 (7)
PET SEMATARY (1983)	32 (13)	22 (3)
THE TALISMAN (1984)	23 (12)	14 (2)
THINNER (1985)	25 (4)	16 (6)
CYCLE OF THE WEREWOLF (1985)		5
SKELETON CREW (1985)	32 (10)	16 (7)
THE BACHMAN BOOKS (1985)	3	27
IT (1986)	35 (14)	31 (7)
THE EYES OF THE DRAGON (1987)	26 (1)	12 (6)
MISERY (1987)	30 (7)	26 (2)
THE TOMMYKNOCKERS (1987)	23 (8)	14 (1)
THE DARK TOWER I (1988, Trade)		18 (4)
THE DARK TOWER II (1989, Trade)		9 (2)
THE DARK TOWER I (1989)		10
THE DARK HALF (1989)	26 (5)	18 (4)
THE DARK TOWER II (1989)		11 (3)
THE STAND, reissue (1990)	35 (4)	
FOUR PAST MIDNIGHT (1990)	22 (5)	20 (3)
NEEDFUL THINGS (1991)	20	14
THE DARK TOWER III (1991, Trade)		10 (3)
GERALD'S GAME (1992)	24 (6)*	
DOLORES CLAIBORNE (1992)	4 (4)*	
THE DARK TOWER III (1992)		3*

Source: *New York Times Book Review* (1976-1989)

*Figures in parenthesis indicate number of weeks at number one.

*Data for the hardcover releases of *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*, as well as the mass market paperback issue of *The Dark Tower III: The Wastelands*, are incomplete because each novel remained on the lists into 1993.

instance, at the beginning of the summer or at the start of the Christmas shopping season, a publishing house typically releases a major new hardcover book from a "Brand Name" author--say, James Michener, Tom Clancy, Sidney Sheldon, Jackie Collins, or Danielle Steel, to name a few--shortly after the paperback issue of the preceding year's smash hit. For the most part, this strategy guarantees said "Brand Name" two prime locations on both the paperback and hardcover racks in the chain bookstores such as WaldenBooks and B. Dalton; the publisher's intends to create a market where no mall shopper can possibly fight the impulse to purchase the latest from their individual favorite. Moreover, if all goes well, the paperback release finds its way onto supermarket selves and into department stores, as well as other book dealers, and presumably inspires the shopper to purchase the newest hardcover release.

Before King, publishers usually maintained this marketing strategy. They would even hold their bestselling authors's books back in order to prevent market saturation. What King has done, however, to challenge this tradition and to set himself apart from the other "Brand Names" is two-fold. On more than one occasion, he has issued two or more hardcover books within a calendar year, without negatively affecting each other's sales (in fact, every hardcover book King publishes seems to outperform the last). He has also issued "special collector's editions" of particular novels--

i.e., *The Eyes of the Dragon*, *The Dark Tower* series, *The Talisman*--whose resale values have, on occasion, increased more than four times their original cost in a twelve-month period. For example, *The Dark Tower II: The Drawing of the Three*, released in late 1987, had an original sale price of \$100 for a signed limited edition; more recently, a classified advertisement in the December 1988 issue of *Castle Rock: The Stephen King Newsletter* offers the same edition (shrinkwrapped, of course) for \$450. His ventures into the limited edition market have proven lucrative as well. The 68-page, 13.5" X 21" *My Pretty Pony* had a first printing of only 280 copies; each copy, however, sold for \$2200 (perhaps in part because it is sheathed in stainless steel with an inset digital timepiece). What is truly remarkable, though, is that these special editions are not the only copies of King's books to show a return as great as this. Some of King's early first trade editions are sold as collectibles for anywhere from \$350 to \$2000.

The kind of popular success that King enjoys is evidence that the mass audience no longer relies on the intervention of the gatekeeper to determine what items of art are, and should be, most significant to it. In other words, the technological advances and the mass availability of popular art, as well as the weekly compilations of what's in, of what is "art," and of what's not, virtually renders the role of the gatekeeper nought. In terms of the

publishing industry, the literary canon of the post-modern age is no longer in the hands of the elite minority--the gatekeepers--for what they say, and think, and feel, no longer matters. What matters is that the audience now determines which texts, which myths, which art, it wants to canonize, and this "canonization" only promises to get further and further away from views of the elite minority and become more and more a product, a reflection, of what matters to culture as a whole.

Thus, an "artist" such as King--that is, one who reaps the rewards of presenting over and over his impression of what is *most* important to mass culture--produces what may well be among the most *significant*, the most *meaningful*, works of art in the post-modern age. "The gothic mode," cultural critic Leslie Fiedler writes in the introduction to his never-more-vital *Love and Death in the American Novel* is "an apt one for telling the truth about the quality of our life" (1966). Surely one of the best known academic cultural critics, Fiedler's *Love and Death* is as entertaining as it is insightful, for it so accurately forecasts the state of art in the age of the blockbuster:

In gothicism, the American novelist not only finds opportunities to render inward experience symbolically, to present the world which typically strikes him as a riddle in riddling terms: but in it, too, he discovers ways of mythicizing the brutality and terror endemic to our life. There is, moreover, incumbent on the American author an obligation to negativism, which the sentimental genres cannot fulfill and which realism converts to mere pamphleteering. All fictionists are

committed, surely, whatever their other concerns, to revealing the inevitable discrepancy between what life at any moment is imagined and what it is, between what man dreams and what he achieves, between what he would like to believe and what he fears is true. But the "what he fears is true" is the subject par excellence of the gothic, when it is more than mere trifling and titillation. (503)

It comes as no surprise that America's best-selling author, the man canonized by the masses, deals with the "what he fears is true," and what culture fears may be true, with his emphasis on the effects of the changing role of the family in his fiction.

That King's popular success has coincided with the meltdown of the nuclear family might not be pure chance. Culture's obsession with shifting family roles and values manifests itself in King's "early" works. Indeed, beginning with *Carrie* (1974) and ending with his self-proclaimed "compilation of everything I've ever done," the appropriately named *It* (1986)--King has been rewarded for his insights into a topic which is of great concern to a vast majority of American people. Each of the texts from this period both reflect and reinforce existing family ideologies. A child, or teenager, is often victimized by parental weaknesses. The rallying call of the texts is two-fold: to parents, the message--not just from King, but from the culture which endorses him--is to straighten up, to take responsibility for one's actions, while to young readers, the exchange is one of socialization, of preparation, for learning how and why culture believes and behaves as it

does. To be sure, the significance of these texts lies in their ability to help us better understand ourselves and our culture.

Perhaps none of Stephen King's novels illustrates culture's concern for the changing role of the family as much as *Cujo* (1981). This novel not only details the modern day struggle of a family (the Cambers) battling the evils of alcoholism, but also of another (the Trentons) trying to reestablish a family bond severed by a mother's misguided behavior, her infidelity. As is often the case with King's fiction which centers on children, the adults, the parents, are usually portraits of weakness and selfishness, the very cause of the demise of the family unit, while the child is usually characterized by his or her strength in the face of adversity. The story of the Cambers revolves around father Joe, a man who drinks too much, his wife, Charity, a mother who hates her life with her abusive husband, and their son, Brett, a boy of great perseverance and poise despite the sub-par surroundings of his environment.

Though minor characters in the morality play which is *Cujo*, the Cambers are also significant to the story because they own the canine of the title. In fact, a passage early in the novel makes clear the disease which has inflicted itself upon the Cambers family unit:

by two that afternoon Cujo would be lying in the dusty dooryard (or in the barn, if THE MAN would

let him in, which he sometimes did when he was drinking, which was most of the time these days). (17)

It is not insignificant that this eye-witness account is presented from the Saint Bernard's point of view, for it is the poor rabid dog who must carry the weight of doling out Joe's punishment for drinking too much, which in turn is the cause of the neglect he shows toward his family.

Yet, son Brett is fortunate that he has resourceful mom, Charity. She has been lucky enough to win \$5,000 in the state lottery, a total which she hopes will be enough to buy her, and her son, a way out of their personal hell. Even though she knows that Brett "love[s] his father very much," she has "never been sure just how Joe [feels] about his son" (46). She laments that "Joe had used his hands on her a few times in the course of their marriage" (47), and she recollects that

seventy-four had been the year Brett's night problems had begun--restlessness, bad dreams, and, more and more frequently, incidents of sleepwalking. It was also the year Joe began drinking heavily. Brett's uneasy nights and his somnambulism had eventually gone away. Joe's drinking had not. (47)

That Brett's "night problems" begin at the same time Joe starts "drinking heavily"--that is, that a parent's socially, as well as privately, unacceptable behavior would come back to haunt his or her child--reinforces existing cultural dogma about parental responsibility to children. Indeed, the manner, the energy, with which canine Cujo

attacks his alcoholic owner represents Joe Cambers failure as a man, and more specifically, as a father:

Joe covered his throat with one hand and tried to grapple with Cujo with the other. Cujo backed off momentarily, snapping, his muzzle wrinkled back in a great humorless grin that showed teeth like a row of slightly yellowed fence spikes. Then he came again.

And this time he came for Joe Camber's balls. (129)

Clearly, the message is one of socialization, of social codes, of ideas that culture believes, and *wants* to believe, is true: Alcoholism is not an disease which only attaches itself to the individual; rather, it is a social disease which inflicts itself upon the whole of American culture.

Just as alcoholism is an effective and valid "what he fears most" for King's gothic fiction, adultery, the driving force behind the Trenton family drama, wreaks havoc on our strict societal codes for marriage and parenthood. Donna Trenton's inconsistencies about her marriage vows are directly responsible for the death of her young son, Tad. The Trenton plot in *Cujo* picks up with Donna attempting (for the most part unsuccessfully) to distance herself from her on-going sexual liaison with her husband's best friend and tennis partner (and local furniture-restorer) Steve Kemp. Since infidelity is a *complicated* issue, and since King must make her a somewhat sympathetic character, Donna is not all to blame for her deception; her husband Vic Trenton suffers from that all-too-well-known male "problem," which entails displacing his attention from his wife and her "needs" to

his occupation, his business, a two-man advertising agency struggling to make ends meet in the small town of Castle Rock, Maine.

As is typical in King's fiction, the failings of the parents come to haunt the offspring. In *Cujo*, no one is hit harder by the disaster that befalls this tragic American family than Vic and Donna's only child, their son Tad. The novel, in fact, opens with Tad as he discovers the "monster" that hides in his closet:

Tad stared at the creature in his closet with drugged, horrified fascination. There was something that . . . was almost familiar. Something he almost knew. And that was the worst, that almost knowing. Because-- (7,8)

Because!?! Because what? Because Mommy's not supposed to have an affair? Because a good Mommy does not commit adultery? Surely, a responsible parent would not intend "to talk to her husband" about her concern for her son's health, but then forget because her boyfriend shows up:

She meant to talk to Vic [about Tad], and then Steve Kemp came while Tad was at nursery school, and she forgot, and Tad screamed that night too, screamed that it was in his closet, the monster, the monster! (10)

In world of Stephen King, every family has a skeleton in its closet.

Indeed, never one to overestimate his audience, King runs this particular family's troubles into the ground. When Vic first sees his wife's soon-to-be nemesis, her own personal *bête noire*, *Cujo* catches Vic's "eye...and Vic would

have sworn it was laughing." This line is immediately followed by a page break, a so-called "gap" in the text, and then a new "scene" in which Vic finds out his biggest client faces a public relations crisis that might jeopardize their business relationship (16). Thus, in a short period of textual "time," his manhood takes two strikes: His business is in trouble, and he senses that he and his wife might be "drifting slowly apart" (31). He worries:

Had [Donna] taken a lover? They sure didn't sleep together much any more. Had she done it? He hoped it wasn't so, but what did he think? Really? Tell the truth, Mr. Trenton, or you'll be forced to pay the consequences. (32)

While Vic is left to fret with himself about his family and his career, Donna "drift[s] into her affair, almost inadvertently." She sees it as a reaction against Vic's workaholicism and on the boredom she feels being "left with a growing child and too much time on her hands" (43). For Donna, the situation is a result of

an explosion of sewage from a buried pipe. A similar sewer pipe, she believed, ran beneath the neatly tended lawns of almost every marriage in America. (43)

Though much of this is cheaply manipulative and morally simplistic, King manages to keep his audience's attention, through book after book, after book, and so on.

In fact, King is most effective when he traps his characters in claustrophobic situations over which they have little control. In *Cujo*, the action really picks up when Donna and Tad are stuck alone in the car, a broken-down,

beat-up Ford Pinto. Confined to the hot car with the windows rolled up so that the rabid dog cannot attack them, Donna understands that she must confront Cujo, the manifestation of her guilt, of the evil she brought upon her family, specifically upon her son Tad, who falls closer to death from moment to moment. Donna has a "terrible feeling that the dog was looking at her, not at a woman who just happened to be trapped in her car with her little boy, but at Donna Trenton" (150). She confuses her "harsh panting" with that of the dog's (161), and she tries to control the feelings of guilt brought on by Cujo:

Stop it, she commanded herself roughly. It doesn't think and it's not some goddamn boogeyman out of some child's closet. It's a sick dog and that's all it is. Next you'll believe the dog is God's punishment for committing--

Cujo suddenly got up--almost as if she had called him--and disappeared into the barn again. (163)

In a way, this passage summarizes the moral issue related in *Cujo*, as well as most of the King oeuvre: Donna has struck a post-nuclear-family Faustian bargain by committing adultery, and what she sacrifices is her son, who in turn pays the price for his mother's indiscretion.

This simple truth of American family morality is made even more clear when King "thwacks" us yet again with another not-so-subtle reminder of what happens when a parent puts his or her family in jeopardy. Vic is away on business, protecting what little is left of his and his partner's interests in the Sharp Cereal account, and Donna

and Tad remain stuck in the Pinto amid the increasingly oppressive Maine summer heat. Meanwhile, with nothing better to do, with no family or responsibility with which to be concerned, Donna's partner in crime, her "boyfriend" Steve Kemp, breaks into the Trenton house and further interferes with the family's everyday existence by pulling "a portrait from the wall," which he drops on the floor and "stamps down hard on the glass" (198). As if this and the rapid dog Cujo are not enough for Donna's payback, Kemp commits what is surely among the ultimate violations of the sanctity of marriage when he retreats upstairs and proceeds to masturbate on Vic and Donna's bed (200).

Even canine Cujo, possessing an uncanny ability to see things much the way a human might, seems to understand where the blame for his rabies lies. The dog considers Donna "THE WOMAN who had caused this dreadful pain in his head and in his body" (219). He wants to attack

THE WOMAN most of all. The way she looked at him, as if to say, *Yes, yes, I did it, I made you sick, I made you hurt, I devised this agony just for you and it will be with you always now.*

Oh kill her, kill her! (220)

As the struggle between Donna and Cujo intensifies, Donna comes to understand more and more that Cujo is a monster from within, a physical representation of the guilt which now consumes her:

For a moment she was looking out of his eyes, seeing herself, seeing THE WOMAN--was he seeing himself through hers?" (227)

Later still, Donna feels that

they had come to know each other intimately, and that there could be no stopping or resting for either of them until they had explored this terrible relationship to some ultimate conclusion. (275)

To an "ultimate conclusion" they do go: Donna pierces Cujo's heart with the broken end of baseball bat, while Tad dies in the unbearable heat in the back of the Pinto.

Although King himself has been critical of the way this novel ends (he even agreed to a change--Tad survives--in the screen version), in many respects, *Cujo* could conclude no other way. What begins as a fairy tale, then develops into a "realistic" account of a rabid dog's decay paralleled with that of the fracturing of two families, ends with both the Trentons and the Cambers in a state of transition--a state of transition which echoes the current state of the family in modern American culture. The remaining family members must come to terms with their loss and do what they can to repair the damage that has been done. Indeed, the novel's morality is one that the audience wants to hear and one that they want to believe: namely, watch out, be careful, do not drink too much, and do *not* commit adultery, but *do* everything that can be done to keep the family strong.

The dual family soap operas which play out in *Cujo* are adapted to fit the plot in other Stephen King texts. In fact, his first novel *Carrie* details the trials and

tribulations of single parenting. Teenager Carrie White, whose father Ralph died shortly before his daughter was born, has spent her formative years living under the critically strict arm of her religious-fanatic mother Margaret. Rather than using her religious convictions as a tool to enhance her daughter's childhood, Margaret White instead uses Christianity as means of control, as a way to make Carrie remain childlike and innocent and thus stay a part of Margaret's life whether this is what Carrie wants, or whether it is not. Margaret's most costly mistake is to fail to discuss menstruation with her daughter. The changes in Carrie's body, her blossoming power as a woman and as an adult, are represented by her telekinetic abilities. The conflict between mother and child, and the difficulties Carrie faces in a society for which she has been ill-prepared, are tied directly to Carrie's blossoming womanhood, her rite of passage to independence, a passage which certainly can be made easier with the help and guidance of an understanding parent.

Yet, since Margaret continues to envision a family structure in which her daughter remains with her as a child with a child's ideals and expectations, she is horrified to learn that Carrie is leaving her for one night to attend her high-school senior prom. She throws "lukewarm" tea in Carrie's face (94). She reacts by "trembling, her face frozen except for her nostrils, which continued to flare,"

and she throws "back her head and screams at the ceiling" (95). Worst of all, though, she swings "her whole arm into a blow against Carrie's face" (95). The prom, for Margaret, is a place where her daughter is sure to be exposed to the "sins" of the dating ritual, that is, a place of conflict with *her* warped version of religious faith, and thus a place from which she needs to protect her child.

A typical troubled-teen, which according to American ideological morality is often the result of a broken home, Carrie does not behave like her fellow classmates at school. Her telekinesis is not only what sets her apart. She is a "chunky girl with pimples on her neck and back," and she is a social outcast, "a frog among swans" (4). Because her insensitive peers treat her so harshly--for example, they throw sanitary napkins at her while she experiences her first menstruation in the girl's locker room shower--the rage she lets loose at the end of the novel seems justified. The destruction Carrie causes to her school and to her town is really nothing more than an expression of the anger, of the confusion, shared by any number of teens to varying degrees. Like her peers, Carrie White's body is speaking to her in ways that it has not spoken to her before; the changes at this time in one's life are confusing, even for teenagers who are lucky enough to have been raised in a comforting and caring home. Thus, since Carrie has no one at home to whom she can turn, her confidence and self-

control wane. Her recognition of where the blame lies explains why she returns home at the end of the novel and kills her mother: "I came here to kill you, Momma. And you were waiting here to kill me. Momma, I, it's not right, Momma. It's not" (210). The dysfunctionality of the family in *Carrie* clearly contributes to the tragic conclusion, which finds both Margaret and Carrie dead.

King's 1983 novel *Christine* tells yet another side of the troubled-teen story. In this case, Arnie Cunningham, who has "glandular machinery gone totally bananas" (2), is--like Carrie White--smothered by a possessive mother, Regina, who refuses to allow her son to grow up. She has Arnie's life mapped-out for him:

Her son had warm, supportive parents who cared about him, who would give him anything (within reason), who would gladly send him to the college of his choice (as long as it was a good one), thereby finishing the game/business/ vocation of Parenting with a flourish. (216)

Although she thinks she is doing what is best for Arnie, Regina's overall outlook on parenting conflicts with society's dominant view. She considers it a "game," a "business," a "vocation," which is certainly a mistake, especially within the world of a Stephen King novel, and she rules, with an iron fist, over Arnie's father Michael. Worse still, she tries to prevent Arnie from seeing his "girlfriend," the 1958 Plymouth Fury, *Christine*, an action which initiates her son's rebellious behavior.

As in *Carrie*, the plot of this rather curious Oedipal drama involves a simple return to the wish-fulfillment fantasies of the outcast teen. Likewise, this novel also finds that the source of the teenager's problems lies at home with a mother's inability to understand and accept her child, and not in some arbitrary supernatural occurrence. Indeed, the Plymouth, which is clearly a projection of the fury locked within Arnie, gives the teen the strength and guidance that his parents fail to give. Because of the new-found confidence he derives from Christine, Arnie begins to date the most desirable young woman in his class and also stands up to the school bullies who used to push him around. But, as with any teen who ignores the advice and guidance of his or her parents, Arnie gets carried away. Mysteriously, the town bullies begin to be run down by an automobile, while at the same time the vampiric Plymouth begins to get younger and younger. As with *Cujo* and *Carrie*, *Christine* ends apocalyptically for the family. Michael is killed by Christine, and Arnie and Regina, who realizes too late that she never really understood her son, die together in an automobile accident.

Whereas Arnie and Carrie are teenagers who are led amiss by the failures of their parents, *Firestarter*, *Pet Semetary*, and *The Shining* involve a more typical King denizen. Much like *Cujo*, each of these novels edifies conservative family values. The dysfunctionality of the

McGee family in *Firestarter* is in place when the novel begins. Wife and mother Vicky is dead, and Andy and his daughter Charlie are on the run from governmental authorities. It seems young Charlie possesses the unique ability to think *real* hard and make objects and people catch fire--in King's language, pyrokinesis--and naturally, the evil government wants to get its hands on her in order to turn her into a lab rat so that it can see if her talent, her birthright, can be coopted for military purposes.

In *Firestarter*, the destruction of the nuclear family lies not only at the feet of the parents but also upon those of a government that has turned its back on the fundamental values of a democratic society. The narrative, thus, flashes back to the 1960s, where in college Andy and Vicky participated in a government-controlled experiment which involved ingesting a fictional drug with LSD-like side-effects. The implication of the novel is that Andy and Vicky's drug experiences are to blame for the genetic mix-up which ignites Charlie's behavior. That is, the problems that befall the McGee family are the result of a bureaucratic, unsympathetic government which also holds some responsibility for the collapse of the American family:

Andy could find no flaw in his own character on which to blame this royal ballsup, no sin of the father that needed to be expiated upon his daughter. It wasn't wrong to need two hundred dollars or to participate in a controlled experiment, any more than it was wrong to want to be free. (354)

Beneath the surface of *Firestarter's* anti-drug message burns the suggestion that the economic factors of the modern world hinder the effectiveness of the family.

Not only does the doctor to whom Andy takes Charlie set a standard of fatherhood which places an overwhelming emphasis on parental responsibility, his words can also be read to reveal a government that has let its society down by failing to do its part to provide a social system which enhances family life:

The father is the authority figure. He holds the psychic reins of every fixation in the female child. Oral, anal, genital; behind each, like a shadowy figure standing behind a curtain, is the father-authority figure. To the girl-child he is Moses; the laws are his laws, handed down she knows not how, but his to enforce. (78)

The so-called villain of *Firestarter*, then, is a modern government which is too occupied by the insignificant and not concerned enough for what is most important--namely, the survival of the family unit in an always-changing world. Indeed, the novel concludes with the fire in Charlie's eyes burning more menacingly than ever after her father is killed by government authorities. She sparks her talent and destroys the intelligence compound where she had been held captive, and made orphaned, by her government.

Unlike *Firestarter*, the machinations of *Pet Semetary* are aimed solely at the institution of fatherhood. Even a well-meaning dad such as Louis Creed can invite disaster onto his clan by holding onto unrealistic ideals and by

opting for the easy way out in a family crisis. The specific incident that triggers the Creed's troubles (Louis does not spend Thanksgiving with his wife and children because he cannot get along with his in-laws) is minor, but it nonetheless shows how fragile the nuclear family is in a King novel, as well as in the world today. During his holiday weekend home alone, Louis learns of the ancient burial ground beyond the pet cemetery in the woods behind his new Maine home. His knowledge, however, grows not from a specific failure on his part but rather from what would seem to be an overconcern for his daughter Ellie. Buying into the legend that burying a dead animal in the "pet sematary" causes its resurrection, Louis brings daughter Ellie's cat there in an attempt to spare her the trauma of facing death for the first time. He, in other words, chooses to keep things simple, to keep the realities of life hidden from his daughter, and had he been with his family for the holiday, he would have had no other option than to be strong and help his family cope with their loss, to confront their problem directly, rather than repress it until it surfaces in adult life.

His bent toward overly simplistic and tidy solutions to common problems, as well as his concern for shielding his family from death, from the outside world, leads him to act irresponsibly when a real trauma enters his life. Already having difficulty adjusting to Louis' career move from a

large city to rural Maine, the Creed family virtually crumbles when two-year-old Gage is struck by a truck. Although a family can usually survive the loss, no matter how grievous, of one of its members, Louis's self-imposed obligation to fix what went wrong results in the crisis which ironically destroys them all. Rather than confronting his wife and daughter and thus attempting to help them heal, to help them deal with Gage's death, Louis takes it upon himself to bury his son in the graveyard behind the pet cemetery. He knows that Gage will likely return in the same Zombie-like condition as that of the "dead" cat. A mere substitute for their lively young son, zombie Gage returns home, but his emotional condition is much worse than the cat. This toddler is a monster, an Oedipal mix-up who kills his mother, and in turn, is re-killed by his father. Just as the family troubles of alcoholism and infidelity manifest themselves in the form of a rapid dog in *Cujo*, the "evil" that finds its way into the Creed household in the shape of the living dead illuminates the notion that the family-threatening monsters of misguided protectiveness and side-stepping responsibility negatively impacts a child's early development.

Like Louis Creed, Jack Torrance of *The Shining* tries to live up to the expectations that he holds for himself as a father. A recovering alcoholic, he isolates his family for a winter inside a haunted hotel, where he intends to

write a bestselling novel. Since he has failed at teaching because he hit one of his students, he feels an even greater responsibility to care for his family. Yet, as the winter passes, his disenchantment with his expectations of fatherhood intensifies; his failures as a parent slowly possess him. For example, Jack tries to imitate his own father by giving his son Danny a wasp's nest he finds on the hotel roof. However, whereas Jack found happiness in the gift from his father, the nest he gives his son embodies his own failures. The wasps that live in the nest emerge at night and repeatedly sting his son. Thus, Jack falls prey to his failures and finds himself more interested in the history of the hotel than in the family for whom he is supposed to provide. Moreover, he begins to drink yet again, thereby reopening the wound he suffers from his alcoholism. As with the wasp's nest, he creates the hole through which the horror seeps.

Jack's failure to maintain a strong family unit makes Danny yet another child character who finds himself cursed with a eerie birthmark. As have Charlie McGee, Carrie White and Gage Creed before him, Danny Torrance suffers from "sins" of one of his parents. Because of his "shine"--that is, his ability to see both the past and the future--the evil that lives in the Overlook Hotel tries to possess him. In fact, this intuition, the "shine," warns him about the danger of spending the winter trapped in

the hotel. He also "reads" his mother's thoughts about "DIVORCE," a concept that Danny does not fully understand beyond knowing that it is "bad." He is even alternately attacked by gross embodiments of his parents, possibly in a symbolic custody battle. He is cornered in the hall by the snake-like firehose, and he is nearly accosted by the decaying woman in the tub in Room 217. Clearly, Danny is a pawn in the marriage game his parents play. As an agent of the hotel, Jack wants to take Danny in and give him a permanent home, while Wendy, whose motherly instincts warn her of danger, tries to cut off her husband's visitation rights. Failing on all counts, the Torrance family unit is doomed. However, Danny and Wendy are ultimately saved by someone from outside the family, the youngster's surrogate father, Dick Hallorann. Hallorann, who shares the "shine" with Danny, rescues the family from Jack and the Overlook Hotel and takes them to Maine. Presumably, they can begin their life over again.

With a little bit of fanfare and a lot of words, King's self-proclaimed "summation of everything [he has] learned and done in [his] whole life," the gigantic 1090-page horror epic *It*, continues this theme of children struggling to make sense of a world where traditional family structures are under constant attack by the misplaced priorities of the modern world. Although similar in many ways to the novels which came before, *It* is unique to King's

early canon. The novel is a bridge from the author's concerns for early childhood development and familial support to those of his career most recently, where he often details what many of his characters would be like as adults. As King himself says:

I have written the book in two parallel lines: the story of what the characters did as kids and the story of what they're doing as grownups. I'm interested in the notion of finishing off one's childhood as one completes making a wheel. The idea is to go back and confront your childhood, in a sense relive it if you can, so that you can be whole.

The structure of the novel alternates between the contrasting stories of seven children and six adults (one of the adult characters commits suicide early in the novel because he does not have the courage to confront his childhood "monsters"). Hand-made (or computer-written) for the well-received television mini-series it became, *It's* narrative cuts back and forth between the years 1958 and 1985. The former year provides the historical and cultural backdrop for a more innocent time when seven children, social outcasts all, meet, bond, and battle the amorphous clown "It" for the first time. In the latter year, 1985, the friends, now grown, gather once again to successfully kill off the demons that haunt both them and their hometown. The two narratives unfold concurrently; pulling off visually-simulating, film-like tricks in a way that only he can, King flashes back and forth between the ideologically-

relative decades to show that the situations the characters face as adults echo their experiences as children.

The roll call of childhood hangups that the characters must confront result, for the most part, from the upbringing each child received from his or her respective post-modern dysfunctional family. Emotional leader and stutterer, Bill Denbrough had it made--that is, until his family was torn apart by the death of his younger brother, George, who unfortunately is monster It's first victim in 1957. Overweight and overwrought Ben Hanscom and asthmatic Eddie Kaspbrak are from single-parent homes; fatherless, neither Ben nor Eddie has a positive male influence in his life. And then there is Beverly Marsh: Like Ben and Eddie, she is raised in a broken home, yet she is also physically and emotionally abused by her stepfather as a child and then again by her husband as an adult.

The three other children who make up the gang do not come without their own social baggage. Mike Hanlon is an African-American, and Stan Uris, the adult who commits suicide, is Jewish; what makes their childhood less than ideal is that their hometown of Derry, Maine, is quintessential New England: white, middle-class, and Christian. The last member of the group, Richie Tozier, is somewhat of a curiosity for King. The worst that can be said about his family is that his mother does not understand him because of their gender differences. She laments that

she did not have a little girl who "she could have understood" (351), but still his family is the most secure of the seven, which may explain why Richie is the last to see the "frightening things" that happen in Derry (278).

It can thus be read as an allegory of each character's struggle to reconcile with his or her admittedly difficult past, a re-confrontation with childhood memories and monsters which brings about an inner-peace to most of the adult characters in the novel. Just as King allows his characters to mature in this text, so too does he. Though it is the last of his novels to focus on protagonists who are children, recent publications such as *Gerald's Game* (1992), which tells the story of a woman who is trapped by her dead husband and in turn must learn to cope with childhood memories of sexual abuse, suggest that King is not going to stray too far from what has worked before. Since King's audience is concerned about their role in family life and about how that life is changing in American culture, his readers use King to write out their anxieties and fears and also to reiterate and reinforce existing ideological beliefs. That the books are so similar and that each outsells the next is the bottom line. King's audience wants, and pays a lot for, repetition and redundancy, which is surely not a negative in the business of popular entertainment. It is instead the reason why the demand for King's products will always be greater than the supply.

CHAPTER 3

FAMILY PORTRAITS: HOLLYWOOD'S HOME SWEET HOME

Myth: The spirit of the old moguls, with their consummate showmanship and their insistence on quality, even at the expense of profit, is gone forever. Hollywood today is run by accountants concerned about nothing but profit. *Truth:* The old moguls were far from homogeneous. Some were skilled showmen with good taste. Some were inept fools with bad taste. All of them, however, were in the business for the money more than for the art. Pictures of high quality were the exception rather than the rule, just as they are today.

David McClintick, *Indecent Exposure: A True Story of Hollywood and Wall Street*

The movie business is not a personally judgmental business. It has a twisted kind of democracy. It doesn't matter how someone got a job or even if they are doing a good job. If someone makes money, everything's okay. I think they'd hire Godzilla if he brought in six hit pictures.

Lucy Fisher, then-Senior Vice President, Warner Bros.

On Tuesday morning, April 10, 1979, the day after Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* won five Academy Awards including Best Picture and Best Director, six Hollywood executives met privately after a monthly production meeting to hash out the details for Cimino's next project, *Heaven's Gate* (Final Cut 232-40). The six high-ranking executives--United Artists (UA) President Andy Albeck, UA Head of East Coast and European Production Steven Bach, UA Production Executive David Field, Executive Vice President of

TransAmerica (then-parent company of UA) and UA Chairman Jim Harvey, UA Production Management Executive Lee Katz, and UA Head of Business Affairs Dean Stolber--were to decide whether or not to give the final "go-ahead" to Cimino's proposed film, and once decided, to determine the total at which the director's budget would be approved.

Though the financial considerations were initially put on hold as Albeck, likely still caught up in the euphoria of Cimino's win the night before, insisted that UA "didn't want just another Western," but rather "an epic, an Academy Award-winning epic," his wide-eyed optimism was short lived when money-man Katz spoke up:

"Well, you're going to be paying for one," said Katz, his chuckle constricting to a rattle as he observed Albeck's lips compress.

"How much?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"How *much* am I going to be paying?"

The meeting then momentarily becomes a free-for-all, which in turn is interrupted by Albeck's demand, more forcefully this time, "How much is this picture going to cost me?"

Again, Katz replies,

"I think that you are facing at least fifteen million dollars. At least and at best."

"You said one million additional earlier. That would make it twelve million six," said Albeck.

"I said a million over *if* he makes the picture in the sixty-nine days he's asked for. I don't believe he will or can. I think this budget is at least two weeks light, and with the picture operating at something over a hundred thousand dollars a day, six days a week on location, that means an additional one million two, bringing it to twelve million eight. *Plus* the million dollars

in shortfalls I estimate, making it thirteen eight, and I arrive very quickly at fifteen million dollars by including overages I believe will take place in miscellaneous overtime, in the music account, the post-production account, the prologue and epilogue accounts--which I regard as sheerest fantasy--and on the fact that the director went double budget on his last picture."

Albeck, who did not rise to his position as president of UA by making bad business decisions, even when he wants "an epic, an Academy Award-winning epic," is justifiably concerned about backing a product whose financing is speculative at best. Thus, he even goes so far as to consider selling the rights to the project to Warner Bros., a deal which would surely enrage director Cimino, who because of the Oscar win the night before, had become a hot property in Hollywood. Albeck's concern switches from awards to rewards, or the lack thereof:

"At what cost does a company decide it can't afford not to let a picture go?" asked Albeck sternly.

"Under our system," Bach replied, "at a cost beyond which the distribution people feel they can make money. They all have been high on the picture; they've all said they could do business with it, but if they feel we can't recoup a fifteen-million-dollar investment--"

"Plus interest, advertising, and promotion."

"Plus interest, advertising, and promotion," Bach continued, "by an Academy Award-winning director who has yet to make a failure, then I guess we won't make it. *Shouldn't* make it."

At a final budget of \$44 million, the figure at which the film was written off, including promotional costs, Cimino's sweeping Western "masterpiece" opened to poor critical

reviews and even worse business, and the film became one of Hollywood's most celebrated bombs.

Though the story of *Heaven's Gate* has been widely told and retold, I have quoted Steven Bach's book extensively because the conversation among the six executives is surely indicative of the way that so-called artistic decisions are made in the film capitol of the world. The only concern for "high art" is that the picture contend for the Academy Award, a distinction which is not traditionally thought of as "high" nor is it one that revels in its recognition of artistic achievement but rather on its potential for increasing box-office returns. The UA business meeting focuses primarily on the financial aspects of the creative process, surely a process that becomes less creative and more monetary every day in Hollywood. Neither Albeck, nor Bach, nor Katz, are concerned with supporting Cimino in making the best picture possible, in producing a lasting artistic impression. What concerns them is the bottom line: Does the profit potential justify the monetary risk?

This emphasis on Hollywood as first and foremost (and only) a business with the goals of business in mind has always been the driving force behind the industry. Indeed, in *The Hollywood Studio System*, industry-analyst Douglas Gomery categorizes the American film industry into three major historical epochs (189). He considers the first epoch

the 30 years or so before the development of the studio system. This period, in Gomery's account, saw the film industry make the initial introduction of its product to a mass audience for a mass profit and watched as these profits turned the business into a multi-million dollar money machine. The second epoch, then, encompasses the Studio Era, the tales of which have been extensively written and re-written. The last epoch--our present era--consists primarily of independent productions shot on location that are then distributed throughout the world by the few major companies that have managed to survive from the Studio Era. Gomery notes, too, the changes in the audience during the third epoch. He sees the consumption of the film product as no longer a "national habit" for a diversified audience, but rather as a purchase made by a specialized audience of young people who go to the cinema while on vacation from school, usually during the Christmas and summer breaks.

These three epochs of the American film industry ring true because of the specific issues that Gomery suggests are the driving force behind the machine that makes the movie business run. His film-industry epochs do not progress so much by technical changes, nor by dominant images, nor by the productivity of particular stars or directors. That is, neither the films themselves, nor the people who make them, are the way to compartmentalize the history of film; instead, he views film history in terms of

the financial rather than the aesthetic. Each epoch results from the dominant business or purchasing practices of the time, not from an arbitrary sense of artistic importance. Indeed, the history of the film industry is a matter of Wall Street and market research rather than one of art form and experimental cinema.

Like any business that relies on profit as the criterion upon which success is measured, Hollywood in the age of conglomeration knows that the consumer of the film product is central to the process of filmmaking. In light of this, Bruce A. Austin complains that "the thinking and writing about movies have been fixed on the history, criticism, and appreciation of the surface phenomenon of movies while disregarding the important issues of who is watching the screen, why they go to the movies, [and] what they like and dislike" (*Seating ix*). Austin would find an ally in celebrated film director William Wyler (*Some Like It Hot* and *The Apartment*). In a 1944 issue of *Sales Management*, William A. Lydgate's article, "Audience Pre-Testing Heads Off Flops, Forecasts Hits for Movie Producers," quotes Wyler, whose career has spanned more than six decades in the volatile world of Hollywood. "I have a theory," the famed director is reported to have said to Lydgate. "It is not to bore the audience."

Wyler's "theory" clearly applies when one considers the evolution and commercialization of film over the course

of the last 70 or so years. Not underestimating the importance of satiating the movie-going audience, of satisfying consumer demand, the studio moguls of the 1920s who oversaw the system taking its shape set about creating a product which would find the largest possible audience. Before 1922--that is, when film remained within the domain of the people whose agenda was surely quite different from that of the moguls--the pioneers of the innovative technology could come to little fundamental agreement about what a featured film should be. The first filmmakers failed to come to a consensus whether movies should be fiction or non-fiction, whether they should be feature length (about 90 minutes) or less, whether stars should be used and developed into a system all their own, or whether a film's budget and production values should be on a large or small scale. However, after 1922, the industry was able to come to agreeable terms: films would be fiction; they would run for at least 90 minutes or more; they would be vehicles for particular stars who in turn would be hand-picked by the studio bosses; and the films would be filled with lavish production values and be supported by specific budgets which would vary depending on the individual film itself, and on the stars and director involved. Why are these the criteria upon which Hollywood settled? The answer, as always in commodified Hollywood, even in the golden days, is easy: namely, economics.

The idea of a star system, along with the stars' accompanying submissiveness to the various studio bosses, and the decision to employ big budgets and grand productions, both served as a way to create a "cottage" industry and to keep independent filmmakers at bay, thus maintaining the profits within a small circle of major studios. Yet, even more important in the studios' effort to maximize profit was the determination of what it was that the movie audience expected its films to be. Since it was fictional escapism they wanted, it was fictional escapism they got; since it was stars they wanted, it was stars they got; since it was large-scale productions they wanted, it was large-scale productions they got; and since it was an hour-and-a-half to two-hours entertainment they wanted, that, too, was what they got.

In 1940, F. Scott Fitzgerald opened his novel *The Last Tycoon* with this description of Hollywood and its prototype wunderkind Irving J. Thalberg, undoubtedly MGM's--and arguably the industry's--most famous producer:

You can take Hollywood for granted like I did, or you can dismiss it with the contempt we reserve for what we don't understand. It can be understood too, but only dimly and in flashes. Not a half dozen men have been able to keep the whole equation of pictures in their heads.
(Schatz, *Genius* 8)

Apparently, Fitzgerald recognized Thalberg as one of these half dozen in part because of the foresight the legendary producer displayed by realizing early on that his job as a

film-maker was to find out what the audience expected and be sure to deliver on this expectation. In fact, Thalberg introduced the concept of post-production work into the filmmaking process. He treated the first print of a particular film as sample material from which the final release evolved. Moreover, Thalberg also initiated other now-standard industry practices: studio screenings, sneak previews, and the preview-retake process that earned MGM the nickname "retake valley" because of Thalberg's extensive post-production changes. As Thomas Schatz notes, "Thalberg figured that the public was the ultimate arbiter of a movie's quality, that only an audience could decide if a picture really worked" (37).

Over the course of the short history of the film industry, Thalberg's philosophy has come to dominate Hollywood production. Currently, postproduction work in Hollywood--including reshoots, audience research, advertising, and publicity, among others--may consume nearly as much time, effort, and money as the initial investment in making the film itself. For example, *Variety* reports that Disney's 1990 summer release of *Dick Tracy* had overall negative costs of \$46.5 million and \$54.7 million in total distribution expenses. The latter figure includes \$48.1 million in advertising and publicity expenses alone. The total cost of getting the film on the market then is \$101.2 million. This figure far exceeded the average cost to

produce a feature film in 1990 (\$23.5 million), which itself had increased over ten times what it was fifteen years ago, \$2.3 million in 1975. Moreover, the average marketing costs in 1987 had grown to the seemingly ridiculous sum of \$7.5 million, about 43% of the average cost of producing the film itself in that year, a percentage roughly equal to that spent on *Dick Tracy* (Schatz, "Hit" 41). Too bad for Disney that all their effort went for nought: After grossing just over a hundred million, *Dick Tracy* was for the most part not considered as great a success as many industry insiders thought it would be.

The case of *Dick Tracy* fairly represents the guessing game that Hollywood plays in its attempt to give the audience what it wants. In order to make a blockbuster out of a what might merely be considered a somewhat financially successful venture, studios turn to their marketing departments, which in turn make most of their strategic decisions after carefully considering audience input and expectation. Bruce A. Austin notes that studio marketing departments are typically divided into three separate entities. Responsible for booking the films into the theaters and establishing the opening dates, the "sales" section also negotiates the financial terms with the exhibitors. Thus, by employing the latest technology in the field of market research, the sales section is instrumental in determining what the release pattern will be--that is,

choosing whether the film will open in "wide" release, a strategy which usually allows the film to earn a great deal of money very quickly, or in "limited" release, which is generally used with more prestigious projects that are expected to generate the all-important good word of mouth. Indeed, as then vice president for advertising and promotion at 20th Century Fox, John Friedkin said,

All that promotion can buy is a couple of weeks' business and after that it has to be word of mouth. If the picture is bad, you might as well shoot everybody coming out of the theater--they will quickly enough kill any film. (*Seating 3*)

The second division of the marketing department oversees the advertising campaign for the product. Typically, the product's advertising team establishes both the general "look" of the film's advertising, including arranging the trailers and designing the poster art. The marketing department also determines what media "buys"--that is, the outlets for specific advertisements--the studio will make. Each of these decisions are made with the anticipated target audience in mind. The third marketing area, the publicity or promotions department, has to consider a target audience when it sets up such promotional matters as television guest spots as well as the relatively new phenomenon of merchandizing and advertising tie-ins, such as plastic cups at Taco Bell, hand puppets at Burger King, and synthetic figurines at the local Toys 'R Us.

Yet, no matter how hard the entire marketing department may try, even its best combined effort cannot sell a film in which the mass audience has little interest. This straight-forward truism of the business surely contributes to the lack of "risk-taking," both in terms of art as well as in terms fiscal, though the free spending on "concepts" films suggests that risking it on the latter may be better than chancing it with the former. Hollywood's 1993-summer campaign is indicative of the way the industry works. The business of summer is the most crucial time of year for Hollywood. Thus, the key ingredient to making and marketing a summer film, to distributing and promoting a blockbuster-in-waiting, is Hollywood's highest concept--its audience. Accounting for nearly half of studios's annual earnings, the summer has not become fiscal darling it has because that is the way Hollywood wants it. Indeed, why would they when it means releasing a film against many competitors (over 40 major productions were released between the middle of May and Labor Day weekend in 1993)? Certainly, sound business practice does not dictate placing a product in a saturated market that cannot support it, which is why marginally-successful films generally make it to video much quicker than the "hits." The reason Hollywood releases so many films in the summer is because that is when the audience is there: children are out of school, the temperature is hot, parents are on vacation, and so on.

The demands of the audience are not lost on the producers of blockbuster fare. A roll call of the films of summer 1993--a summer which became the most successful on record by earning \$2.2 billion in total box office--show the familiarity under which Hollywood operates. Though a typical summer on most fronts, 1993 was atypical for the low number of sequels, three: *Hot Shots!: Part Deux*, *Weekend at Bernie's 2*, and *Stakeout II: Another Stakeout*, none of which performed all that well at the box-office. Yet, understandably, the business still loves its sequels, since these films are almost always assured of grossing 70 to 80 percent of the total earnings of its predecessor, which means film such as *Hot Shots!: Part Deux* can almost guarantee at least a \$30 million return (a figure it, in fact, exceeded). Economic decisions can thus be made with specific figures in mind. The audience is already aware of the product; the marketing is relatively inexpensive.

Likewise, Hollywood has found it useful to "borrow" from other entertainment industries. The fiscal guidelines that have led to sequel fever also go far in explaining the "based-on" category. Here, 1993 is particularly top heavy. Audience-friendly, the films in this group have been previously market tested and are often enhanced by a big name, market-tested star: Tom Cruise in the film version of John Grisham's bestseller *The Firm*, or Sean Connery and Wesley Snipes in Michael Crichton's controversial suspense

novel *Rising Sun*, or even Harrison Ford in the screen adaptation of the television show *The Fugitive*. In fact, television has recently become the favored mine from which Hollywood strips. Not too long ago, the industry ignored the potential of its bastard younger sibling, but that was before *The Addams Family* and *Batman* went through the roof. (Interestingly enough, Hollywood made feeble attempts to claim that both of these films were based on the respective comic books, but there is no doubt that the public affection for these properties stemmed more from television exposure than bookshelf space.) Indeed, television provided a significant number of "new" concepts for the summer of 1993: Besides the certifiable blockbuster *The Fugitive*, Hollywood, by way of television, gave its consumers *Life with Mikey*, starring Michael J. Fox as a former sitcom star who is forced to come to terms with his years-ago success as a young star, as well as *The Coneheads*, a decades-old *Saturday Night Live* comedy sketch. Look where else Hollywood gets its ideas for its summer fare: rock 'n roll (*What's Love Got To Do With It?*, based on performer Tina Turner's biography, *I, Tina*), video games (Disney's *Super Mario Bros.*, for which producer Roland Joffe paid Nintendo \$2 million for the use of the name), so-called "classic" film (Mel Brook's parody, *Robin Hood: Men in Tights*), and the comics (*Dennis the Menace* from producer John Hughes). And, do not forget the Name Brand Star vehicle, which features familiar faces

offering up entertaining, predictable, familiar product every time: Whoopi Goldberg in *Made in America*, whose original script was rewritten in order to bring it in line with Whoopi's African-American ancestry and *In the Line of Fire* with Oscar-winning action star Clint Eastwood (old action stars never die; they just win Oscars).

Moreover, some of the most anticipated films of the summer were by-products of test marketing and sneak previews. The ending to the Sharon Stone steamer *Sliver* was reshot about one and a half months before its premiere because a test audience hated the original ambiguous conclusion. Likewise, *Last Action Hero*, top world-wide box-office draw Arnold Schwarzenegger's summer entry, did not test well. Sent back for reshoots nearly two month before its opening, the film had performed poorly in a survey of the screening audience, which related that this "action hero" did not have enough action. The filmmakers of *Sliver* and *Last Action Hero* obviously failed to listen to what their test audiences told them; both films played well below expectations. Though these examples reflect incidents where the audience could not fix what was already broken, more often than not the test audience helps Hollywood set its agenda. For instance, \$100-million-plus-grosser *Sleepless in Seattle* had its release date switched from March to early summer because it tested very positively with its target audience (women 25 to 49), and excellent sneak previews

affected the way Hollywood and the press talked about and treated *Free Willy*, the story of a boy and his whale, a film which returned more than industry analysts anticipated.

Perhaps no film delivered on its promise for the summer of 1993 as much as Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park*. The promotional and marketing juggernaut surrounding the film is a case in point. The film's success clearly is not a product of Hollywood's so-called image factory. Rather, the hit-before-it-was-a-hit *Jurassic Park* is more the result of Universal Studio's recognition of the existing demand for the film as well as its related merchandizing tie-ins. With huge sales of the book, which initially was not promoted very heavily, as well as other prehistoric commercial successes--the cultural curiosity about dinosaurs especially among children was a "grassroots" uprising that began well before the mass popularity of purple-dino-pest Barney--the audience for *Jurassic Park* had spoken, and the only financial choice the film industry could make was to jump aboard for the ride.

Not only did Universal establish what it figured was the best release pattern and date for the film--June 11th, historically one of the strongest weekends to open a picture that is expected to have "legs"--the studio also influenced other summer distribution patterns when all of the competition backed off and opted not to release any major films within one week of Spielberg's theme-park adventure.

Indeed, a film's initial weekend grosses have become so important to its overall success that the vast number of unknown quantities which have to face off with the few sure-fire hits such as *Jurassic Park* will often go to any length to find their audience as quickly as possible, which may explain why one studio gave away the soundtrack to 1992's *Gladiator* so that it would move ahead of *Wayne's World* on the weekend grosses list. Rather than force feeding the public goods and services, this kind of desperate act sounds less like agenda setting and more like begging, which is what it turned out to be as this marketing ploy failed to help the film find an audience.

The confidence the entertainment industry had in *Jurassic Park* to find its audience is certainly reflected by the consumable goods which were marketed simultaneously with the film's release (Table 3-1). The numbers alone illustrate a market demand that precedes a supply. No capitalist-based industry with shareholders to answer to would invest so much capital in products that were not destined to be large sellers. In entertainment, the demand creates the supply. Even the film itself self-consciously relishes in its status as a sure-fire blockbuster, seen most vividly in the scene where Spielberg's camera lovingly pans the amusement park's souvenir shop in a momentary break from the roller coaster ride that is the movie. Moreover, John Hammond (the Richard Attenborough character) calls his own

grandchildren Jurassic Park's "target audience", and over lunch, he remarks about product tie-ins that all it takes is to "package" it, "slap" it on a plastic lunch box, and then "sell" it. With over 100 licensees for over 1000 products, *Jurassic Park's* logo has clearly been slapped on much more than lunch boxes.

Table 3-1: Partial list of *Jurassic Park* Promotional and Product Tie-ins for United States Territory Only

Licensee	Products
Ace Novelty	Plush toys for amusement park distribution; plastic mugs, squeeze bottles, and lapel pins and inflatables for amusement mass market distribution only.
A. H. Prismatic, Inc.	Holographic products, limited to key rings, boxes, magnets, bookmarks, postcards, watches, badges.
Ballantine Books	<i>The Making of Jurassic Park</i> , a behind-the-scenes non-fiction book.
BBC International	Athletic shoes, hikers, beach sandals, and play shoes sized 10 to 4.
Bibb Company	Sheets, pillow cases, comforters, bed spreads, window dressings (curtains and draperies); beach and bath towels.
Choice Hotels	Promotions.

Table 3-1, con't

Licensee	Products
College Concepts	Boxer Shorts, boys 8 to 20, adult.
Collegeville/Imagineer	Child and adult costumes, over-the-head masks.
Colorforms	Colorforms stick-ons (standard, travel and deluxe sets), easy color poster art, action stamps.
Cosrich	Children's toiletries, soap (foam, gel, liquid, molded), molded soap dish, locker bag sold with approved-licensed product, only shampoo, bubble bath, printed bandaids, toothbrush, toothpaste, bath mitt, sponges, lip balm, giftsets of licensed items, mirror, brush and comb set, cologne, nail brush, play shaving accessories, tissues.
Craft House Corp.	Model kits; poster pen sets in all sizes.
Creative Confection Concepts, Inc.	Giant-size and mini-size jawbreakers
Dakin	Soft goods, mugs, magnets, and keychains.
Data East Pinball, Inc.	Arcade-style pinball machines.
Daydream Publishing Inc.	Wall calendars, student planner, locker calendar and print portfolio.
Ero Industries, Inc.	Sleeping bags, slumber mates, playhouse, slumber/play tents, slumber mats, and "My First Sleeping Bag"; carry bags--limited to backpacks, fanny

Table 3-1, con't

Licensee	Products
Ero Industries, Inc. (con't)	packs, tote bags, book bags, sport bags, patented software locker bag/organizer, patented 2-piece combination back pack, soft luggage, nested luggage; door gear--door organizer, wallets, coin purses, hand bags, shoulder bags.
Ferrara Pan Candy & Co.	Branded fruit snacks including fruit snacks, jellies (Ju Juls) and gummie dinosaurs.
Fresh Caps	Baseball and knit caps for adults and children.
Harley, Inc.	Fashion coordinates, cut and sew, roller printed sets, fashion fleece, turtle necks, short sets, sets with sewn-on patches, no basic t-shirts or fleece. All for 8-20 boys, mass market only.
Horizon	Model kits based on <i>Jurassic Park</i> dinosaurs.
Illusive Concepts	Over-the-head latex mask replicating <i>Jurassic Park</i> dinosaurs.
Imaginations 3	Paper goods, limited to portfolios, theme books, memo pads, binders, dimensional erasers. Study kits, limited to erasers, ruler, sharpener, with pencil case. Puffy vinyl stickers sold with or without puffy-sticker album.
Kenner Products	Action figures; human and dinosaur play sets. Vehicles (including ride-ons), role-playing toys, toy weapons,

Table 3-1, con't

Licensee	Products
Kenner Products (con't)	target sets, radio-controlled toys, modeling compounds.
Kid Dimension/Hasbro	Raptor guard, electronic table-top pinball game, walkie talkies, sound target set, TRANQ gun.
LCGA/TAG	T-shirts, fleece, caps, fashion tops, bottoms, jackets, sets for department and specialty stores.
Don Ling's Removable Tatoos	Temporary tatoos.
McDonald's	Fast-food promotion.
Milton Bradley Co.	Board games and puzzles.
Noteworthy	Pencils, pencil toppers, pencil boxes, pens, pen toppers, markers, banks, stampers and stamp pads, chalk dimensional key rings. Stationary packs, limited to writing paper, envelopes, markers, stencils. Party Paks, limited to licensed products packaged together. Activity Paks, limited to Create-A-Card stickers which include stamps, markers, paper goods to create cards and stickers.
Ocean of America, Inc.	Nintendo Game Boy, 8-bit Nintendo system and 16-bit Nintendo super system; Nintendo CD-ROM; personal home computers; personal home computer CD-ROM; Phillips CDI and NEC Turbo Graphics.

Table 3-1, con't

Licensee	Products
OSP	Posters, buttons, flat key chains, book bites.
Playtime	Battery-operated and electric road-race sets with track; roller skates, battery-operated tooth-brush, sunglasses.
Putnam	Deluxe storybook, young adult novels, pop-up book.
Sega of America, Inc.	Sega Game Gear, Sega Master System, Sega Genesis, Sega CD-ROM, and video arcade game.
U. S. Playing Card Co.	Playing cards utilizing <i>Jurassic Park</i> dinosaurs on the face cards of standard 54-card deck.
Viewmaster	3-D reels compatible with viewers.
Western Publishing	8 x 8 story books, color activity books, magic slates, sight and sound books, and Flip Flex books.
Winterland Productions	T-shirts, fleece tops and bottoms for 8-20 and adults, all levels of distribution.
Wormser Company	Boy's and girl's sleepwear.

Revised: January 18, 1993

Hollywood got it right with *Jurassic Park*, certainly the best kind of film for, the most successful work of art in, the age of the blockbuster. Here is how the film

performed on the market for the first few months of its release: It set two opening weekend records, one for grossing \$50.2 million over three days and another for the total number of tickets sold, 9.65 million. Moreover, it established a new one day record when it grossed slightly over \$18 million on Saturday, June 12, 1993. From June 18, 1993, to June 20, 1993, the film took in an additional \$38 million, the best ever for a film's second weekend run. With the best first week in Hollywood history (total gross--\$81.7 million), *Jurassic Park* reached \$100 million in a record nine days and presently stands as the second highest grossing film of all time. Its over \$320 million take during the summer accounted for 14% of the total box-office for the industry's busiest season.

Though the marketing and advertising for *Jurassic Park* was estimated at \$65 million, Universal only spent this exorbitant figure because the studio knew that it had a winner with built-in appeal to the mass audience. In other words, neither the marketing, nor the promotions, nor the product tie-ins made the film do so well; rather, they merely *enhanced* its financial performance. If the mass audience disapproves of the work of entertainment in the age of the blockbuster, it is forgotten; it is a failure. If the audiences approves, however, it lives on, not only in memory, but in toys, on video, in sequels, and so on. This fact of the way the entertainment industry does business, of

the way that it measures and produces its successful products, is significant because it clearly shows how far away the selection of our culture's important texts has moved from the taste of some educated gatekeeper, or even from the inspiration of the artist, to the mass audience. "A film," according to acclaimed writer, director, and producer Oliver Stone, "is a limited art form that sells for three to seven dollars and fifty cents a ticket, and it's a person's choice whether to buy it or not."

The mass audience is thus clearly the force which guides the entertainment industry. Indeed, while making a blockbuster, *Jurassic Park* director Spielberg himself says, "I always have the audience in my mind. It's always: How is the audience going to like the villain? Is there enough comedy?" Though Bruce Austin laments the "dearth of data" on the film audience, information is available about who attends film and why they do (not to belabor the point, but this may be among the most important knowledge available since the film audience represents fairly well the individuals who hold the modern-day notion of art in their hands). Garth Jowett and James Linton compiled data made available by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) about movie attendance by select age groups. Their findings are recreated in Table 3-2. The figures show that attendance by the under-40 age group (roughly 55% of the population in 1987) has decreased steadily from 87% to 70%

Table 3-2: Box-Office Admissions by Age Groups

Age	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL YEARLY ADMISSIONS				
	1987	1986	1984	1979	1976
12-20 (16%)*	32	35	36	49	45
21-29 (19%)	30	31	31	27	31
30-39 (20%)	18	20	18	11	13
40-49 (14%)	10	8	8	6	5
50+ (31%)	10	6	7	7	6

*Figure in parenthesis is the percentage of the population of given age group as of January 1987.

Source: Jowett and Linton 90.

in the years between 1979 to 1987, a decrease which Jowett and Linton say is not due to the younger generation removing movies from its social agenda, but rather because the increase in attendance by the 40-and-over group is "in line with shifts in the population as a whole" (89). Yet, a perhaps better explanation than the one given by Jowett and Linton is that each generation is becoming made up by individuals who are more and more accustomed to entertainment, to Hollywood, as a source, as an option, for "art."

The canonization of modern art is truly a democratic process, as Leo Handel's 1950 study *Hollywood Looks at Its Audience* (Table 3-3) suggests. Though the mass audience has surely changed since the early 1950s, Bruce Austin notes that Handel's conclusions are "generally supported by subsequent reports" (*Seating* 73). Handel found that the two

Table 3-3: Sources of Information and Their Degree of Influence on Movie-Attendance Decisions

Source of Information	Considered Most Influential
Hearsay	17%
Reviews	17%
Advertising in print media	12%
Trailer	8%
Advertising in/on theater	3%
Radio	2%
Outdoor advertising	1%
None	40%

Source: Austin, *Seating* 73.

most influential sources for movie-attendance decisions are "hearsay" (in today's Hollywood vernacular, "word of mouth") and "reviews," which may explain why *Entertainment Weekly* magazine recently named Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel two of the most powerful people in entertainment today. The study also indicates that advertising of any sort only accounts for a total of 26% of the responses. However, neither the combined total of the two most influential sources, nor the total for the effects of advertising, equals the "None" response, which suggests that the audience attends a particular film because it wants to, not because of any outside agent, such as marketing or critical response. Indeed, the single most influential link is the audience whether it be in the form of positive responses passed from

one individual to another, or of gut feeling that the attendee has about a particular film.

Austin has made further attempts to understand the motivations of the film audience. In the mid-to-late 1980s, he conducted a study of nearly 500 college students. According to this survey, the three most cited motivations for movie-going among those who attend a film showing three or more times per month are (1) "to enjoy a pleasant activity," (2) "to forget, get away, and escape," and (3) "to learn information" (*Seating* 57). These motivations suggests that not only does a representative sample of the majority audience for movies view the film-going experience as a recreational activity, but also as an event from which they might learn more about themselves and their world.

Indeed, Paul Lazarfeld contends that the information the audience seeks is but a reaffirmation of what they know, of what their culture already believes: "People look not for new experiences in the mass media but for a repetition and an elaboration of their old experiences into which they can more easily project themselves" (Wright 120). In a statement that echoes Lazarfeld, James Anderson and Timothy Meyer contend that the "modern theory of [mass media] effects is turning more and more to the notion that the prime effect of media is not change but the maintenance of social values and relationships in society." In other words, "the media are a major part of the method by which

the operating order is seen as right and proper--the method by which the class hegemony is maintained" (84).

To be sure, the mass-media effects theory of "uses and gratification" supports both of these positions. The "uses and gratification" model is based on the tenet that a variety of psychological and social needs are satisfied by mass-mediated communication (Wright 121). That is, the mass media fulfill the consumer's cognitive needs by strengthening his understanding, knowledge, and information about the world. Moreover, such media as television and film also satisfy affective needs by providing emotional, pleasurable, and aesthetic experiences and enhance integrative needs by giving credibility, status, confidence, and stability to the audience. The mass media, thus, appease needs related to reinforcing contact with family, friends, and society in general, and allow for both an escape and tension release for the participating audience. As Anderson and Meyer note,

the content of the media is responsive to the needs of the individual audiences. Particular forms of content come to the fore, not because of manipulative decision making by media moguls, but because of consumer demands. (170)

One critic who has theoretically considered the role that the audience plays in making meaning of the content of a film is David Bordwell. His important film theory opus, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, opens with a discussion of two traditional theories of film narration: the "mimetic"

and the "diegetic." He defines the former as a concept in which narration is "the presentation of a spectacle," a "showing," while the latter consists "either literally or analogically of a verbal activity: a telling" (3).

Concerned that these theories have "little to say about the spectator, except that he or she is relatively passive" (29), Bordwell wants to add to the two traditional theories a third that centers on the "constructivist account" that viewing a film is a "dynamic psychological process" in which a variety of factors are "manipulated" (32). That is, he posits an active spectator who approaches the film text with individual "perceptual capacities," with expectations based on "prior knowledge and experience" (generally called "schemata") and with the "material and structure of the film itself" (32, 33). Therefore, according to Bordwell, the narrative film "encourage[s] the spectator to execute story-constructing activities," in that the film "presents cues, patterns, and gaps that shape the viewer's application of schemata and the testing of hypotheses" (33). In short, the viewer is actively involved in understanding the film through a "process of hypothesis-testing."

No type of film adheres to Bordwell's process of hypothesis-testing--that is, no film encourages as successfully "story-constructing activities"--as the blockbuster, which based solely on its overwhelming mass appeal *must* by necessity facilitate its audience's wants and

needs moreso than any other kind of motion picture. Thomas Schatz writes in his essay "The Hit" that "Hollywood is coming to realize that the public at large still finds pleasure in the collective ritual of moviegoing, which is most pronounced in the shared experience of a movie hit"--in other words, in the shared experience of a blockbuster (42). Indeed, most consumers of popular culture products have at one time or another felt obligated to read a particular book, watch a certain new television show, or see the latest box-office smash, if for no other reason than to understand "what all the hype is about."

With few exceptions (1992's so-called "art" house hit *The Crying Game* comes immediately to mind), a film usually does not become a cultural phenomenon unless it racks up box-office dollars. Though most large-scale productions today only take in 28% of their revenues from domestic box-office (Schatz, "The Hit" 42)--the other 72% is made up of video rentals, the foreign market, and promotional tie-ins--any major release that does gross over \$100 million becomes a "sacred cow" of blockbuster culture. These films not only earn boffo box office, but also achieve such wide public acceptance, that they in turn emerge a piece of America's artistic heritage. They are popular films that stand up to repeated viewings, that become not a matter of "Have you seen?," but rather "You've got to see!," and that sell and sell and sell. They are a marketing

department's dream; they sell themselves, and anything associated with them. To miss one is to lose touch with America's cultural identity. They are such films as *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (or, in fact, just about any film that carries the Spielberg directorial credit), and *Star Wars* and *Batman*. They are *The Sound of Music*, *Gone With the Wind*, and *The Godfather*. Their names, at least within the industry from which they come, are followed by a meditative hush, and then the roar, "Make me one of those!" These films make stars of the producer, the director, the screenwriter, and the actors, all of whom are fortunate enough to have been involved with the project. They are the movies that "everyone who is anyone" has seen. These motion pictures are unique in that they give everybody involved in the film-making process exactly what they want: to the stars, director, and writer, they give fame and success; to the studios and their shareholders, they give money and money and money; and to the audience, they give the pleasure that comes with the feeling of gratification that each individual member seeks.

One of the obvious places to turn for a concrete list of such films is industry-bible *Variety's* yearly compilation of the all-time film rental champs (Table 3-4). This chart shows the films which have returned the greatest amount of money to their distributors. While the list would differ slightly for box-office grosses, for the most part

Table 3-4: Top 25 All-Time Film Rentals*

Rank and Title (Year)	Rentals
1 <i>E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial</i> (1982)	\$228,618,939
2 <i>Star Wars</i> (1977)	193,777,000
3 <i>Return of the Jedi</i> (1983)	169,193,000
4 <i>Batman</i> (1989)	150,500,000
5 <i>The Empire Strikes Back</i> (1980)	141,672,000
6 <i>Home Alone</i> (1990)	140,099,000
7 <i>Ghostbusters</i> (1984)	132,720,000
8 <i>Jaws</i> (1975)	129,549,325
9 <i>Raiders of the Lost Ark</i> (1981)	115,598,000
10 <i>Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade</i> (1989)	115,500,000
11 <i>Terminator 2: Judgement Day</i> (1991)	112,500,000
12 <i>Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom</i> (1984)	109,000,000
13 <i>Beverly Hills Cop</i> (1984)	108,000,000
14 <i>Back to the Future</i> (1985)	105,496,267
15 <i>Home Alone 2: Lost in New York</i> (1992)	102,000,000
16 <i>Batman 2: Batman Returns</i> (1992)	100,100,000
17 <i>Ghost</i> (1990)	98,200,000
18 <i>Grease</i> (1978)	96,300,000
19 <i>Tootsie</i> (1982)	94,910,000
20 <i>The Exorcist</i> (1973)	89,000,000
21 <i>Rain Man</i> (1988)	86,813,000
22 <i>The Godfather</i> (1972)	86,275,000
23 <i>Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves</i> (1991)	86,000,000
24 <i>Superman</i> (1978)	82,800,000
25 <i>Close Encounters of the Third Kind</i> (1977)	82,750,000

*Note: This tabulation changes annually. For instance, Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* (1993) currently ranks as the number two film of all-time, though not reflected on *Variety's* 1992 chart.

Source: *Variety*, January 11, 1993

the same films would be in roughly the same position (box-office grosses are usually anywhere from one-and-a-half to two times greater than rentals--number one *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*, for instance, grossed just under \$400 million, while *Batman* [4] came in at \$251.2 million, *Terminator 2*:

Judgement Day [11] at \$204.8 million, and *Ghost* [17] \$217.6 million). These films do not need a so-called gatekeeper to ensure that they are not forgotten; instead, they appeal to the only gatekeeper who really matters--the mass audience.

In particular, two items from the list stand out: First, 23 of the top 25 were released after 1975, roughly around the time when *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977) redefined Hollywood's definition of a blockbuster, and second, no less than 16 of the films possess some sort of family theme. Though the specific concentration on family ideology varies accordingly, the fact that so many of the highest grossing films reflect American society's concern for the changing role of the nuclear family is nevertheless worthy of note. Just as best-selling author Stephen King has made a career of helping the mass audience cope with changes within the family unit that are mostly out of its control, the most successful films which come out of Hollywood also use culture's self-imposed concern for modern family life as the backdrop for their storylines.

Such films as *Batman* (4), *Batman Returns* (16), *The Exorcist* (20), *Rain Man* (21), and *The Godfather* (22) make family issues an integral part of their plot development. For instance, Francis Ford Coppola's highly regarded *The Godfather* series is at its heart an immigrant saga that centers on the Corleone family's efforts to assimilate itself as economically productive members of American

society, as well as a passing on of family tradition, honor, and power from one generation to the next. *Rain Man*, meanwhile, has Tom Cruise rebonding with his institutionalized brother (Dustin Hoffman) after their father's death; essentially, the film is about the two brothers rediscovering the importance of the familial bond they share. William Friedkin's film version of William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist* also paints a picture specific to the post-modern American family. Regan (Linda Blair), the twelve-year-old girl who is possessed by Satan, is the product of a broken home. Standing up to the doctors and psychiatrists who insist that Regan suffers from lesions on her brain, mother Chris (Ellen Burstyn), facing this family crisis on her own, knows that her daughter is inflicted by a demon which cannot be cured by medicine alone. Once the family unit is "restored" by the arrival of Father Karras (Jason Miller) and grandfatherly Father Merrin (Max von Sydow)--indeed, in an act only a father would do for his daughter, Karras co-opts Satan from Regan's body--the young girl can enter puberty with the family demons of her past nothing more than mere blips of her psychological and emotional development.

The family as psychological and emotional epicenter of adult behavior is integral to Tim Burton's extremely popular *Batman* series as well. Both *Batman* and *Batman Returns* use the family as the impetus for explaining the odd

demeanor of two of the main characters from the films. In the first, the manifestation of Bruce Wayne's alter-ego, Batman, is explained as the result of a childhood trauma in which the young boy witnesses a criminal attack on his parents. A mugger, who is later transformed into the Joker, kills Batman's mother and father, an event which haunts Bruce into adulthood and in turn contributes to his obsession with fighting crime. In the equally dark *Batman Returns*, the villainous conduct of the Penguin--that is, his polar-opposite-from-Batman personality bent toward evil and violence--is also justified as the natural outcome of an early childhood experience. At the beginning of the film, the Penguin is cast off by his cold-hearted, extremely-wealthy parents, who apparently cannot stand the thought of raising a child with a physical deficiency. The poor, young, webbed-hands and -feet Penguin-to-be does not match up to his parents's expectations for their offspring and is thus deserted by them merely because he is different than the rest of the children. His troubled adult life, his constant need for control, for revenge, is clearly a product of his neglectful parents.

Many of the most successful films of the early 1990s have kept this focus on family themes. Three films, though but two ideas--James Cameron's *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* and the John Hughes-produced *Home Alone* and *Home Alone 2: Lost in New York*--feature latch-key children who have

adjusted to the state of the modern American family. As the top film of 1991 with gross earnings over \$205 million, *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* offers something for everyone. The anti-violent, violent movie travels the conservative route with its traditional family values and in its Western-European, religious metaphor for the post-nuclear messiah, John Connor. Yet, at the same time, it maintains a leftist ideology in its futuristic, big-business, technological, militia-controlled, dystopian universe. In an America overrun by commercial interests and foster children, however, it is the reaffirmation of family values that serve as the emotional center of the film.

Terminator 2 opens with contrasting shots of a child peacefully playing on a swing and then cuts to the bright lights of a war-time explosion, which in turn fades back into the playground as it slowly burns to the ground. The companion close-ups of the swings engulfed in flames and of the burning carousel accurately reflect the film's, as well as modern culture's, loss of childhood innocence, of traditional family values. America society is not only post-nuclear, so too is film's vision of the modern family. In a world where war and violence rules, where traditional family values have been mostly cast away, the next scene introduces foster child John Connor as he makes an attempt to steal cash from an Automatic Teller Machine (ATM). He tells his cohort in crime, another young boy, that his

"real" mother, not his annoyingly intrusive foster parent, taught him the fine art of ATM-robbery. That the state of morality has digressed so far is certainly bleak; yet, there remains something almost Norman Rockwellian in John's prenatal attachment to, and his respect for, his imprisoned mother. It is the 1990s: latch-key teenagers are culturally sophisticated. Their heroes and contemporaries in film still transmit the basics; the media just sugar-coat the conservative message, the moral, the social codes, with a seemingly leftist cynicism toward authority.

The relationship that develops between John Connor and the Terminator takes on the undertones of a father-son bond, though in this particular case the patrilineage is a bit jumbled. John teaches the Terminator to control his violence, even going so far as to make him swear that he will not kill anybody. John tells his robotic "father" that he "can learn things all the time" so that he "can be more human." However, John's mother Sara knows that the Terminator completes the circle for this post-nuclear family. At one point, she watches as John teaches the Terminator how to slap a high-five; her voice-over reveals the conservative codes transferred by the film:

Watching John with the machine, it was suddenly so clear. The Terminator would never stop. It would never leave him, and it would never hurt him, never shout at him, or get drunk and hit him, or say it was too busy to spend time with him. It would always be there, and it would die to protect him. Of all the would-be fathers who came and went over the years, this thing, this machine, was

the only one who measured up. In an insane world, it was the sanest choice.

At the end of the film, "father" Terminator sacrifices himself for his new-formed family. By doing what is best for his "son" John, his life typifies the romantic justification any teenager in a single-parent family would like to have in order to explain his or her missing parent: an out-of-this-world, caring father who puts his family before himself. Indeed, the strength of a family bond will even survive the nuclear holocaust

The early 1990s saw yet another version of the resourceful child--what children are destined to become in this modern age of dual-career families--in the two tremendously popular *Home Alone* films. *Home Alone*, Hollywood's top-grossing film comedy ever, relates the adventures of eight-year-old Kevin McCallister (Macaulay Culkin), a child who manages to function on his own when he is inadvertently left behind by his extended family as his father, mother, aunt, uncle, brothers, sisters, and cousins all rush off to catch a plane for a Christmas vacation to Paris. Initially, Kevin enjoys the freedom of being left home alone. He can do things that he is not allowed to do when he is under the authority of his parents or siblings. He runs rough-shod around the house. He jumps on his parent's bed, and he rifles through his brother's stuff. He becomes self-sufficient. He shops, even going so far as to use coupons, and he does his laundry. He decorates a

Christmas tree and cooks dinner in the microwave. The pleasure he takes in his freedom, though, soon gives way to feelings of loneliness, of missing his family, especially as the two bungling burglars (Joe Pesci and Daniel Stern) continuously plot their attack on the McCallister house.

The two *Home Alone* films manipulate conservative family values in a class all their own. Indeed, as the reality of being home alone eventually sinks in for Kevin, he pays a visit to Santa Claus and asks only for his family back. He then makes his way to church, Western culture's home away from home and certainly a sanctuary for displaced family members. What better place, in fact, for one of *Home Alone's* many plot contrivances, for it is in house of God, at the most wonderful time of year, that Kevin meets his forbidding neighbor-with-the-shovel Robert Blossom, who has until this point scared the bejesus out of the young boy. In the scene which is for all intents and purposes the emotional climax of the movie, Kevin finds out that the Blossom character is not as evil as neighborhood legend had him, but in fact that he is also displaced from his immediate family. Kevin offers his new friend simple advice for repairing his dysfunctional family: "Call your son." Kevin's self-discovery of the importance of the family bond in modern culture motivates him when he makes his way home and prepares for the two burglars who are ready to attack that night. He asserts that his family's "humble" abode is

"his house" and that he has "to defend it." His defensive game plan employs the familiar tools of typical Americana: toys, barbecue utensils, nails, plastic freezer wrap, paint cans, and Christmas ornaments, to name a few. How more surface could the conservative morality of this film be then with its oh-so-holidayish denouement, which has mother McCallister arriving home early Christmas morning? And, just in case the clarification of these social codes is not clear enough, her arrival is followed, shortly after, by the rest of her family. Merry Christmas! Happy New Year!: The McCallisters are together for the holidays.

Whatever might be said about the canonization by consumption of popular culture, there can be little doubt that the masters of the mass-art universe--or at least of blockbuster Hollywood--would have to be fingers-on-the-pulse soul-mates, primo-filmmakers George Lucas and Steven Spielberg, who together account for ten of the top 25 films of all time. Lucas and Spielberg surely have to be recognized as the most successful producers of film art in the age of the blockbuster. Many industry insiders even go so far as to suggest that the two one-time *wunderkinds* are personally responsible for the direction Hollywood has traveled in the last quarter of the 20th century. George Lucas' *Star Wars* trilogy, for instance, is without question one of the most enduring, and endearing, popular fictions of

the Cold War era, as it is generally recognized for both its commercial appeal as well as its artistic merit.

The three films in the series--*Star Wars* (2), *The Empire Strikes Back* (5), and *Return of the Jedi* (3)--relish in their simple combination of literary devices and pulp-fiction derivatives. With the trilogy's focus on the age-old battle between good and evil, with its concoction of childhood innocence and pre-adolescent sentimentality, and its homage to Western motifs and the theatrical serials of the 1940s and 1950s, Lucas's imaginative dreamworld of Luke Skywalker, Princess Leia, Han Solo, Yoda, and Jabba the Hut, et al., appeals directly to an American sensibility. Underneath all its assessories, such as special effects and exotic locales, the film is most effective at its narrative heart, as it centers on the time-honored "quest" theme. Certainly, the story is one that has been told over and over again in American literature: the search for self, for identity, for a sense of family heritage and personal history.

To be sure, one of the more compelling sub-plots of the films is the birth-mystery that is gradually revealed through the course of the series. *Star Wars* opens with supposedly-orphaned Luke Skywalker reluctantly spending his youth working on his Aunt and Uncle's farm in a galaxy far, far away. Meanwhile, Princess Leia, the supposed daughter of the venerated leader of the free world, the so-called

rebels who are battling the forces of evil, is taken hostage by the menacing Darth Vader. What ensues is an intergalactic family horse opera similar to, but yet still unlike, any other on celluloid. Gradually, the script reveals that Darth Vader is (gasp!) Luke Skywalker's father and that Leia is (oh my!) his sister--and Darth's daughter--which spells trouble for the future of the free world as its fate rests on the shoulders of the progeny of a traitor, a turncoat, and a really mean guy at that. Will Luke and Leia use their genetic inheritance, their sixth-sense, their gift for control of the Force, for the common good, or will they abuse it (as their father has) for power and personal gain? Any observer of American electronic culture in the blockbuster era knows the answer, without hesitation.

With his *Star Wars* movies, creator George Lucas clearly demonstrates that he knows what it is the mass audience wants in its art, though he may still lag just slightly behind the one true champion of the "best-selling" film list: producer/director/auteur, cinema-artiste-extraordinaire Steven Spielberg. Indeed, Spielberg is the driving force behind half of the eight films--his *Jaws*, *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and *Jurassic Park*, along with non-Spielberg products *Star Wars*, *Ghostbusters*, *Beverly Hills Cop*, and *Batman*--which *Variety* reports have combined earnings from tickets and tie-ins of \$1 billion. Moreover, a significant number of the top

grossing films carry his credit: five as a director (*Jaws* [8], *Raiders of the Lost Ark* [9], *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* [10], *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* [12], and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* [25]), one as a producer (*Back to the Future* [14]), and another (*E.T.* [1]) for which he performed both tasks. In fact, of the Top 100 all-time films, not including 1993's *Jurassic Park* which currently would be number two overall, Spielberg has directed a total of eight films (add *Hook* [54] and *The Color Purple* [94] to the list above) and produced seven (besides *Purple*, *E.T.*, and *Future*, include *Future II* [41] and *III* [96], *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* [29], and *Gremlins* [33]).

Yet, how often Spielberg's films play off the issues of family in modern culture is still what may be most significant, at least in terms of this study, about his body of work. For instance, *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (1984), the highest grossing film in Hollywood history, focuses on the changes facing an ordinary modern American family. The setting is vintage Spielberg. The middle child of three children, Elliot, the young boy who befriends lost and lonely E.T., and his family live in a suburban development. The houses look alike; the lawns are well cared for; the nuclear family with its 2.2 children, dog, and outdoor barbecue is alive and well. Only fate--in the shape of Elliot's father's secretary--interferes and throws this version of Americana a curve ball. It seems Dad, enmeshed

in a mid-life crisis, and fate's stenographer have run off to Mexico together. Indeed, Elliot's father abandons his family one day and then is replaced a short time later by E.T., who has been abandoned by his "family" when the spaceship which carried him to Earth is forced to take off without him.

Both E.T. and Elliot thus function as familial substitutes when each is in most need of one. E.T. turns out to be everything that the single-parent family could want in its stand-in father. The adjustment period for Elliot and his brother and sister, the effort to cope with their family's new social status, is made easier by the presence of the out-of-this-world alien. Not only is E.T. exceedingly wise, sharing openly his emotions with Elliot, he also pays attention to what is important to the children. He can play "dress-up" with Gertie, Elliot's sister; he takes the three of them trick-or-treating on Halloween night; and, even when he sits at home drinking all day, E.T. remains an excellent role model who teaches Elliot respect for all living creatures when he "communicates" telepathically to release the frogs that the boy's class is about to dissect. Who could ask for anything more?

Perhaps the most "parental" of the values that E.T. teaches Elliot, older brother Michael, and sister Gertie, though, are unselfishness and responsibility, especially in regard to one's family, precisely the two values that the

children's father failed to live up to for them. E.T.'s intense desire to "Phone Home," to reintegrate himself into his own family, speaks to and about the irresponsibility and selfishness of a parent who puts his or her own agenda before the happiness and well being of the family. E.T.'s single-minded purpose toward reuniting with his own species serves as the impetus for the reconstruction of Elliot's family. Overrun by the Federal Agents and government scientists who turn their home into a laboratory, Elliot's family can no longer focus on the ill effects of the turmoil which has struck from within, but instead must put its feelings of abandonment behind and confront the danger from without. When E.T. is mistakenly pronounced dead, Elliot, his mother and his siblings are forced to come to terms with their loss and subsequently learn to function, to face whatever the world might throw at them, without the help of their father or husband. Just as the family comes together, E.T.'s heartlight blinks on, signalling the re-bonding, the rebirth, of Elliot's family. They re-claim their house, their life together, by helping E.T. escape the intrusions of the outside world, of an unfeeling, uncaring patriarchal authority, the government representatives, other than the single one who tells Elliot that he dreamt of meeting an alien when he was a child. The now-famous final scene, which has E.T. first touching his own heart followed by Elliot's and then uttering the pull-on-the-heart-strings

line "I'll be right here," is the ultimate confrontation with loss. As E.T. boards the spacecraft which has come to take him home, he turns and waves at the onlookers, seemingly blessing them. The camera then pans to Elliot's family, which has been joined by the sensitive federal agent. They make the picture-perfect nuclear family, watching as its guardian angel disappears into the stars.

Like his show-biz contemporary in the publishing industry Stephen King, Spielberg found the formula that worked and stuck with it. Though he first hinted at the theme which would eventually come to dominate the concepts behind many of his films in *Jaws*--besides cleaning up the love affair between Brody's wife and Hooper, the shark expert, which appeared in Peter Benchley's novel, Spielberg also implies that Brody is motivated to overcome his fear of the water because it is what is best for *his* family, for the way his sons look at him--the family issues in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* are explored more explicitly. The movie confronts two modern shifts in family life that became socially and politically significant in the late 1970s: divorce and missing children.

The characters in *Close Encounters* who experience the initial contact with the alien spacecraft receive a psychic "implantation" that compels them to attend the human/extra-terrestrial summit at Devil's Tower, Wyoming. This mysterious implanting, though, can be more easily

explained in human terms, in the obsessions and responsibilities of the modern parent. For instance, Jillian Guiler (Melinda Dillon) is motivated to make the trip to Wyoming because she is desperate to get her son back. The young boy, Barry Guiler, becomes fascinated by the aliens in their first visit to his small town in Indiana. Yet, it is during their second visit that he allows himself to be "kidnapped" by them. His mother watches in horror as her son climbs out the door into the bright lights of the waiting spacecraft. Her duty, especially as a single-parent, is complicated by the seemingly inexplicable disappearance of the boy. Jillian thus has no choice but to devote her life to his safe recovery. She obsesses on Devil's Tower for reasons she cannot understand; however, her parental instinct pays off when she is reunited with her son at the light show at the end of the movie.

Jillian's confrontation with the complexities of modern-day parenting is merely a sub-plot of the film's dominant narrative. Indeed, the main focus of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* is Roy Neary (Richard Dreyfuss), a hard-working average Joe who is struggling through a mid-life crisis which has him torn between his accountability to his family or to himself. Roy is a father and husband who finds his relationship with his wife and children at a crossroad; while he does not *intend* to hurt

them, his values, his priorities, his beliefs, have come in conflict with those of his family, but especially with those of his wife, Ronnie (Teri Garr). The changes that he experiences after his "close encounter"--in fact, he is physically marked by the sunburn on half his face--frustrate and confuse both Roy and Ronnie. He has faith in what he has seen, while she does not. He needs more from his life and thinks that his opportunity is here, while she approaches the issues they face more practically and just wants him to be satisfied with the life he has. Even as they kiss, Roy can only do so half-heartedly: He looks to the sky and appears to be thinking of something better.

While *Close Encounters* is very much a sympathetic portrayal of a somewhat controversial subject--so-called male menopause--the level on which it might work most effectively is as a childhood fantasy about dealing with the enigma of divorce. As Roy becomes more and more obsessed by his overwhelming desire to know and understand what is happening to him--to the changes he sees taking place--Ronnie slowly detaches herself and the children from his troubled life. The last straw is when she finds him, fully clothed, in the shower. She tells Roy that she thinks they should attend family therapy together. When he refuses, she recognizes that their marriage is broken beyond repair. She tells him, "None of our friends call us. You're out of

work. You're wreaking us," and she takes their children to her sisters.

Whereas these private, in-house events might seem all too familiar in post-Vietnam matrimony, what happens outside the home is only every child's idealized version of the question, "Where's Dad?" Just look at his adventure--that is, at what could possibly be important enough for him to leave "the kids" for: First, he takes on the deceptive government employees who try to prevent him from fulfilling his mission. Then, he beats all odds and makes his way to the other side of Devil's Tower, where he finds the newly-constructed facility for communicating with the alien visitors. And last, he volunteers--nay, he was *called*--to accompany our extra-terrestrial friends back to their homeland. Is there a better way for a divorced child to think of his or her absent parent?

Spielberg finds the opportunity to call on culture's affiliation with the nuclear family in other places besides alien territory. Two of his early-1990s hits with high expectations, as is typical with Spielberg products--*Hook*, which performed slightly below, and *Jurassic Park*, which did not--have family drama at the heart of the action. In *Hook*, Peter Pan (Robin Williams) has lost touch with his "inner child," and in turn, he has lost his connection, his bond, with his family. When the evil Captain Hook kidnaps his children, Peter realizes that his priorities have become

displaced by the demands of the outside world. Once he rediscovers what is truly important in life, his family, he defeats Hook and returns his children from Neverland.

Jurassic Park, meanwhile, takes a unique look at the typical family vacation. Park master-mind and money-man John Hammond does not merely round up some of the top scholars in their respective fields, but he also brings in his two grandchildren, whose mother is enmeshed in a messy divorce. Reflecting the atmosphere of commercial excess which engulfs *Jurassic Park*, Hammond tells the taken-aback academics that the youngsters are the perfect guinea pigs for an experimental journey through the prehistoric amusement park: "They're our target audience," he assures them. Although Spielberg's Hammond is far less the megalomaniac than he appears in Michael Crichton best-selling novel, this aside will come back to haunt him when the young girl and boy are lost in the out-of-his-control park.

Luckily for Hammond and his grandchildren, though, one of the experts who has been invited to the park for the weekend is paleontologist Doctor Alan Grant (Sam Neill), a top-notch dinosaur-man who could be reminded of the necessity for *human* proliferation. Stranded with the Hammond grandchildren, Grant is forced to care about living creatures and to recognize that having a family might not be the wrong course for his life after all. By escaping the

genetically-produced dinosaurs of Jurassic Park--in other words, the self-imposed, single-minded pursuit of career, of scientific discovery--Grant comes to terms with the emotional, decidedly unscientific, need for family interaction and love. Like *Hook*, *Jurassic Park* knows where its foundation lies, at home and with the family.

The case for Spielberg's pro-family emphasis can only be made stronger by noting the blockbuster *Back to the Future* series, which he produced. Though the first film flirts with the social taboo of incest--remember when Marty McFly (Michael J. Fox) and his mother (Lea Thompson) *almost* kiss?--what all three together represent are a retelling of an American family's heritage, its roots. Marty travels back and forth in time, meeting and interacting with his family at different points in its history. In the first film, where these cash-cows are typically born, Marty single-handedly manipulates his parents's relationship. Without his help, so the film goes, they never would have met, or at least they never would have been as financially successful if it were not for Marty. Indeed, the extraordinarily positive changes that Marty's interaction with his teenage parents brings about encourages the generation of family and children: Just witness what it accomplishes for the McFly's.

The specific reason for Steven Spielberg's popularity, like that of Stephen King, is certainly

arguable, for any valid explanation can only be the product of supposition. What is certain is that both of these extraordinary entertainers have repeated the right theme at the right time, and in turn, they find themselves in the foreground of blockbuster culture. As Chair of Columbia Mark Canton notes, popular entertainments such as film "often anticipate what society is about rather than merely reflect what it is about." There is no doubt that the is-it-an-affect-or-an-effect, chicken-or-an-egg argument about popular culture clearly deters from what really matters. First, popular entertainment is *obviously* about the transmission of social codes and shared beliefs, and second, the blockbusters of literature and film just might be the artistic heritage upon which the future of American culture is built.

CONCLUSION

CONSTRUCTION AHEAD: CHANGING TIMES ON THE INFORMATION SUPERHIGHWAY

Television speaks for itself.
Edwin Newman, NBC News

Seven hours, forty-one minutes: The A.C. Nielsen Company has found that this is the length of time the average American household has its television turned on during a single day. "My perception," says Ted Harbert, President of the Entertainment Division at ABC, "is that Americans don't talk to each other very much. People used to sit on the back fence and talk to each other. They'd sit on the front porch and neighbors would talk. Television has replaced the back fence." Echoing Harbert's sentiments is author and frequent *New Yorker*-media guru Ken Auletta (*Three Blind Mice: How the TV Networks Lost Their Way*): "Television has become a basic American utility like water or electricity. The typical home uses a television more than it does a sink, stove, shower, washer, dryer, or automobile." The Academy of Television Arts and Sciences reports that a television is manufactured for every child born in America on a given day. In 1976, the average home had seven channels from which to choose; today, the number

is up to 33. Moreover, in the not-too-distance future, so most industry analysts predict, the channels available to the typical American household will be close to, if not exceeding, 500, and as if this is not enough, the next step will be a post-channel television universe that will allow viewers to watch, on demand, whatever they want, whenever they want.

From the time in 1928 when General Electric televised the first big news event, a nomination acceptance speech by presidential-hopeful Al Smith that was transmitted to a total of two receiving sets, T.V. has clearly come to dominate the way that entertainment and information is disseminated in post-modern America. The chapters of this study that are devoted to the blockbusters of publishing and film have shown in part the extent to which television has altered the way our culture produces, markets, plots, and so on, the entertainments we value and the information we share. The makers of these entertainments have found that the greatest rewards of modern culture--a large audience and the highest grosses, for example--can be found in the articulation of one of television's dominant themes, the family. Think how alike the family themes in such cultural texts as Stephen King's novels and Steven Spielberg's films, arguably the *most* popular, *most* successful, *most* worthy of so-called canonization, works of entertainment in the world today, are to some of the most endearing, and enduring,

television series in the medium's short history: *I Love Lucy*, *Ozzie and Harriet*, *Bewitched*, *Father Knows Best*, *All in the Family*, *The Cosby Show*, *Full House*, *The Brady Bunch*, *The Addams Family*, *Dynasty*, *Donna Reed Show*, *Family Ties*, *Roseanne*, *Home Improvement*, and *The Simpsons*, to mention only a few.

The effect that television has had on literature and film, though, transcends the singular issue of the way these media have been driven to share information about the social construct of family. Television has also initiated the shift from a traditional artistic sensibility to that of the blockbuster complex by completely circumventing the middle man and allowing the mass audience to produce its own culture without the intervention of the critic. The entertainments that achieve "blockbuster" status are thus powerful forces with which the post-modern critic *must* reckon. These products speak not only about how America views its institutions such as that of the family--that is, how culture sees itself and passes on its codes--but the patterns of consumption of mass entertainment, patterns that reflect more and more the omnipresence of television, also signal a blurring of the line between what is often considered "low," or popular, and "high," or socially "relevant," art. Because it is where both the popularity of the text and the immediacy of its message take precedence over the personal tastes or political sensibilities of

certain individuals, television might well represent the future of both artistic and blockbuster culture, especially as the latter continues to co-opt the role of the former. Indeed, the "canonization" of culture is in the hands of the mass audience, hands that tightly grip remote controls which scan the televised universe.

The accessibility, reliability, and immediacy of blockbuster culture are not the only reasons that the artistic canon is in the process of transformation. By pointing out the inadequacy of traditional Western-European reflections on literature and film, post-modern critics opened a floodgate--a gate that needed to be opened--by displacing themselves from traditions in art, from concepts about "high" and "low." The problem, though, is that the pundits have replaced one standard, a specific sense of "quality" upon which art should be judged, with another, which is formed around the dominant political view of the interpretive community. Yet, what both sides--the traditionalists who stand by the concept of "quality" and the "post-modernists" who back diversity--have in common is that they do not trust the ability of the mass audience to make its own culture and not be influenced by the machinations of big business. In short, post-modern critics want the productions, the texts, of culture, to fit neatly within their agenda and to reflect their tastes.

Consider the following example of the dynamics of audience demand that cannot be manipulated, or even explained with much precision. When the Oliver Stone-produced television mini-series *Wild Palms* aired on ABC, popular-press media critics gave it a fairly strong endorsement; viewers then sampled the first episode. Apparently, the bizarre plot line, which combined virtual reality and computers with Stone's typically-paranoid Orwellian vision of the future, did not give the mass audience enough of what it wanted, a response which might have been disheartening for both those concerned about "quality," as well as those who are interested in "diversity." The local newspaper of a large university city ran an interview with a specialist in the field of cultural studies. The critic professed that *Wild Palms* was a significant cultural event because it showed how a mainstream medium such as television can be used to "educate" the masses about certain diverse sub-cultures. He must not have been told about the other newspaper story which accompanied his that day. Located just to the left of his observations, this article explained that the mini-series had been performing well below expectations and was turning out to be quite a ratings disappointment for ABC. The nut-shell conclusion: Neither "taste" nor "diversity" can be dictated so easily to mass American culture.

In fact, the market economy of blockbuster culture might well be compared to the stocking and restocking of discount department store inventory. One of the more talked about and celebrated innovations of Sam Walton, the founder of Wal-Mart and Sam's, was the installation of a six-channel satellite system, a system *Fortune* magazine called "a computer-communications complex worthy of the Defense Department." Begun in 1985, the satellite allowed every store in the entire Wal-Mart chain to communicate either store-to-store, or store-to-general-office. Besides greatly reducing the credit card verification time to four or five seconds, which was in line with Walton's desire to get shoppers through the checkout aisles as quickly as possible, distribution centers were now able to track what products were moving out of what stores and in turn could restock the most popular items, or at least items somewhat similar to them. Like blockbuster culture, Wal-Mart went around the middle man, the corporate buyer, who no longer was charged with making the judgment about what inventory to carry.

Sam Walton's business acumen is an on-target metaphor for the state of American culture. While critics still attempt to stock the "best" inventory that is produced through artistic expression, the fact is that these are not the items that are moving out the door, which is the sole determinant of what will move in and replace whatever was on the shelf before. The post-modern critical response to the

market economy, therefore, has been inappropriate. Rather than adopt the discount dealer's philosophy--"Remember Wal-Mart's Golden Rule," Sam reportedly told employees as often as he could, "Number one, the customer is always right; number two, if the customer isn't right, refer to rule number one"--the pundits have moved farther away from any audience of import. They have become a small specialty shop, a club, which bases its membership on secret handshakes, on covert passwords, and they have come to speak only for themselves, and to each other, for they are the only consumers for the products they produce.

In effect, post-modern critics have given up trying to explain the world, which is regrettable, because the new television technology, the information superhighway, opens up all sorts of new avenues for both pundits and hoi polloi to travel together. Perhaps appropriately, because we have become a society that values scientific contributions more than those that come from the humanities, the artistic revolution that is taking place on television screens across America comes at culture not from the sensibilities of "art" critics, but instead from those in the world of business, from the scientists, from the computer whizzes, and the engineers. The future of entertainment and artistic culture has not been the result of new and innovative developments in style or technique; instead, it follows on the heels of the invention of fiber-optic cable, hair-thin strands of

glass that make up the best transmitter of information ever manufactured. Currently used at less than one percent of its capacity, though still able to transmit the complete *Encyclopedia Britannica* every second, fiber-optic cable--a single strand of which can carry all of America's telephone and radio communications--is on the verge of permitting consumers of mass culture to have what they want when they want it. Though the first step will involve expanding the total number of television channels available by the hundreds, the next will result in a post-channel viewing universe that will deliver on demand. Access the comprehensive menu, punch up what you want, and voilà, there it is. "Make no mistake about it," Vice President Al Gore forecasts, "This is by all odds the most important and lucrative marketplace of the 21st century."

If Vice President Gore's words are more than mere hyperbole, which there is every reason to believe they are, we can only imagine, though fairly accurately, what effect this new marketplace will have on such matters as the transference of cultural codes, as well as on the continuing struggle between "high" and "low" culture. Had pop art pioneer Andy Warhol, who showed the world of "high" culture the advantages of "bulk" production, survived to see the superhighway, we can easily envision him turning "The Factory" into a computer-heavy war room producing, or reproducing, "art" that consumers could access any time and

any where they wanted, a situation about which many museum curators are already concerned. The information superhighway, in fact, may well be the realization of much of what Warhol preached. Struggling novelist? Frustrated filmmaker? Just send the text "on the road," and before you know it, you too may have your fifteen minutes of fame. No one is there to stop you, to block the way, proclaiming, "Don't look at this; it's not good for you." Once individuals are capable of communicating with each other directly, of sharing ideas, and entertainment, and art, there may no longer be a need for "high" culture, for the distinctions that critics make, because the consumers of culture, who are already going places where we would rather not see them go, will have even more choices, and they are going to travel there whether we endorse these choices or not.

The significance of a study such as this, then, lies in the methodology used to select both the objects and the subject matter for the focus of the discussion. I have not looked for texts that necessarily spark my own interests nor for those that agree with my personal political bent; what I have done is listen to American culture and found the *objets d'art* that the mass audience wants me to discuss. The entertainments that the mass audience chooses to participate in are virtual treasure chests of the information that culture itself deems most important. The

social construct of family, for example, is one of the social codes and practices that culture has concluded it wants verified, that it *wants* to talk about, which is why it consumes so many products that offer information about this topic. The mass audience is clearly capable of producing its own culture, of sifting through and finding the works of entertainment that it wants to canonize. As cultural critics, therefore, we need to follow the mass audience wherever it goes, for the new technology, the superhighway with its infinite exits, opens up all sorts of new avenues for people to travel, and they are going to go there whether we want them to or not. The age of the blockbuster is clearly upon us. The future of culture will be drawn out as consumer desire draws it out. The inventory of the post-modern canon will be determined the Wal-Mart way--that is, whatever sells is what will be restocked. Though most of what is known about the information highway, about the future of the canon, is conjecture, what is certain is that our artistic creations and our entertainment productions, both of which are arguably becoming one in the same, will continue the tradition of mirroring the values of the culture and the structure of the society from which they came.

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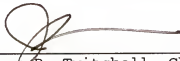
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I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.



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Professor of English

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Donald Ault
Professor of English

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.



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I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.



Andrew Gordon
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I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.



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This dissertation was submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Department of English in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and to the Graduate School and was accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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